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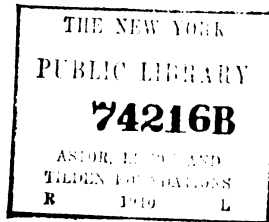
**"ONLY A MOMENT SHE STOPPED, AND SMILED A LITTLE
AS SHE TURNED ASIDE."**

The Little Green Gate

**By
Stella Callaghan**

With Eight Illustrations

**G. P. Putnam's Sons
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To
MY MOTHER

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. AN INTRUSION—THE GATE OPENS . . .	1
II. EXPLANATIONS	18
III. THE "SCHOOL-TREAT"	36
IV. A TEA-PARTY AND ITS EFFECT . . .	52
V. LONDON IN JUNE	73
VI. NINA REALISES	91
VII. A DAY'S WORK	108
VIII. "THREE DAYS, THAT CHANGE THE WORLD . . ."	128
IX. THE CRISIS	147
X. THE METHODS OF THE CRAB . . .	165
XI. THE ONLY THING IN THE WORLD . .	181
XII. A DOMESTIC SCENE	197
XIII. TRAGEDY—AND THE CLICK OF THE GATE	217

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. THE LETTER	236
XV. TEA WITH THE SPARROWS	253
XVI. NINA RESOLVES	274
XVII. THE GATE IS SHUT	294

ILLUSTRATIONS

FACING PAGE

ONLY A MOMENT SHE STOPPED, AND SMILED A LITTLE AS SHE TURNED ASIDE . <i>Frontispiece</i>	
STILL KNEELING, HE HELD IT UP TO HER . . .	14
THE "SCHOOL-TREAT," AS THE COLONEL PETU- LANTLY CALLED IT, WAS IN FULL SWING .	38
SEIZING THE PADDLE, HE SENT THE PUNT FLY- ING OVER THE WATER	70
PETER WAS ENJOYING HIMSELF WITH A ZEST HE HAD NOT FELT FOR MONTHS	116
"AS YOU DECIDE SO MUST IT BE," SHE WHIS- PERED AGAIN	160
"I WON'T LOSE HIM, I WON'T, I WON'T!"	204
DESPERATELY SHE TOOK A FEW STEPS TOWARD THE LITTLE GREEN GATE	300

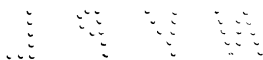
The Little Green Gate

CHAPTER I

AN INTRUSION—THE GATE OPENS

PICTURE to yourself a long, low house, white and creeper-clad, built half-way up a wooded hill, and facing south with an open view of sloping meadow-land in front of it, and beyond that a shining strip of sea. The house is of many roofs, set at all angles, and made up of all dim, subdued colours, tiles mellowed with age. It stands in a garden, slanting in front, in terraced levels behind it. This front garden is a neat affair, set beds shaped into stars and crescents with gay, orderly flowers therein—geranium edged with blue lobelia and such like. Round

the edge of the well-trimmed lawn are standard roses, each one growing into the conventional shape expected of it. The gravel drive runs up on the right hand of the garden, for the front door is likewise on that side, and having deposited its occupant, there is just room for the carriage to drive round to the back of the house and so to the stables. Behind the house the bank rises abruptly very high, and on top of it lies the kitchen-garden, with its homely rows of French-beans and celery trenches. The approach to this back garden is a row of rough stone steps, which climb up the bank from the front drive; the top of these ends in a pergola, running steeply up the hillside, in the summer a glorious riot of crimson rambler, seven sisters, carmine pillar, and others of that delightful and irrepressible family. The garden lies all on the left of this pergola, and in terraces, of which, as I say, the kitchen-garden is the first and most hidden; the second, on the bank above, is the tennis-lawn, well netted and scrupulously kept—(it was the Colonel's



An Intrusion—The Gate Opens 3

pride—only we have not got to the Colonel yet—that there were no daisies or plantains to be found on it whatever, since taking a two-foot strip daily across the lawn, he had once eradicated seventeen hundred and twenty-one roots in three days), the third terrace being the rose-garden—a charming place with a fountain in the middle where roses climb pillars, run on chains, flow over the heads of stone cupids into shells, and do all sorts of wonderful things; and above this is what was known, strangely enough, as the “garden,” a wild, roughly cut out affair, with masses of herbaceous flowers, a blaze of colours all the year round, except for that dreadful stiff month or two in the winter when the last of the autumn flowers has given you its frosty wet leaves, and the spring bulbs are only just showing their tips through the unsympathetic earth. In this dear wild bit the weeds always grew apace and the paths are seldom cleared; no visitors are ever brought to see it (their peregrinations always end with the pergola at the top of the rose-garden), and

top of all there is a little green gate, that leads up a short green path, into the woods. What might not happen with a gate like that? It ought to have been abolished—it should never have been there at all. . . . But it was there, and is still, and, after all, if it had not been, this story would never have been written; for it was down that path and through that little green gate that the man came and found the woman thoughtfully taking cuttings of double arabis. That is where the story begins.

At the sound of the gate's click the woman looked up with a start, and got hurriedly to her feet, for in all her life that she could remember no one had ever come through that little gate but herself. It had been the gate that led to Fairyland, now it was the gate of her sanctuary. Who had dared——?

She was confronted by a man in a tweed suit, medium height and slight, with a thin, half-cynical face. He was as obviously disconcerted as she was indignant.

"I'm afraid I'm trespassing," he said lamely, raising his squash hat.

"I'm afraid you are," she said, gently and coldly.

"And, of course, I can't say it was exactly unintentional, because, of course, I saw this was a private garden," the man went on, "but I was looking for a way out of the woods, where I've been lost, and when I saw your gate I thought I might slip through the garden—but I'm afraid it was frightfully impertinent of me—and of course I did n't see you," he added hopelessly.

The woman had mastered her indignation. After all, the man did not know it was the gate of her sanctuary, and she had seen that he was a gentleman, and telling the truth.

"Please don't mind," she said graciously; "perhaps I can direct you somewhere?"

"That's awfully kind of you, thank you so much. I want to get back to Netherwood Hall, where I am staying."

"Then it would certainly be better for you to come down through the garden, and on to

the road below. It is straight along from there."

"It would be very kind of you to let me; I shall probably be late for lunch as it is."

The woman put down her gardening knife and shook the earth from her gloves. She seemed quite conscious of her appearance, which was quaint in her country sun-bonnet and big blue apron stained with brown soil. She led the way through the pergola, where the red and white ramblers were just showing colour, and they spoke a little, on the way down, of the weather, the woods, and the garden, and especially of the forward state of the roses, which, he said, were not nearly so much out at Netherwood. This pleased her immensely, for she was a true gardener, and revelled in producing anything before her neighbours.

"I shall be able to see for myself next week, as I am coming to Mrs. Brackenridge's garden-party on Tuesday," she said.

"Oh, I shall see you there, and be properly

introduced," said the man; "my name's Peter Marchant," he added, with a whimsical smile.

The woman answered the smile.

"Then you are engaged to Miss Brackenridge," she said; "I remember the name."

"Quite right;" the man's face lit up. "I hope to find you are a friend of Muriel's?" he said impulsively.

"Oh, I only know her very slightly. They are not much here, you see, though we are such near neighbours."

They had reached the front gate.

"That is your way, straight along to the right. You keep under the woods all the way. It's about a mile."

"I don't know how to thank you," said Peter, again lifting his hat, "both for forgiving my disgraceful intrusion—it was really appalling, when I come to think of it—and also for being so kind to me after it. I hope I may be introduced on Tuesday."

"I hope you will," the woman said, smiling, and turned to go up the drive again.

Peter had one of his uncontrollable impulses.

"I say, I wonder if I may ask your name—it seems quite unpardonable—but——"

The woman turned quickly, amused.

"My father is Colonel Maynard—we live here together," she said.

"Oh, thanks awfully, it is awfully good of you, Miss Maynard . . . we shall meet on Tuesday, then."

So they parted, he quickly along the road to Netherwood Hall, and she slowly up the drive into the house. Somehow the cuttings of double arabis were forgotten.

Thus the incident that begins this story was closed.

At the door she met the Colonel (and here we come to him at last), who hearing the unusual sound of voices in the garden was just fussing out to see who it was.

Now if you know any retired army Colonel, retired, say twenty-five years, and can imagine him in his long, low white house in the heart of the country, you have the exact picture of Colonel Maynard. His short, stout, erect figure, his trim white moustache and

An Intrusion—The Gate Opens 9

grizzled hair, his crisp, testy voice, his firm step, growing more deliberately firm with age, his passion for gardening all day and playing Patience all the evening,—you know him well, know several of him probably. He is all over the country, only his name varies, his type never. Nina Maynard was explaining her visitor to him.

“He is Miss Brackenridge’s fiancé, staying there at the Hall. He lost his way in the woods, and came through our gate at the top. I brought him down through the garden and put him on the road.” She always had to go into details with her father.

“H’m, infernal cheek,” rapped out the Colonel. “What’s he mean by treating my garden as a highway? Just like that Netherwood crowd!” The Colonel nursed a grievance against the Brackenridges. They were people who spent half the year in their town house, most of the rest abroad, and only screwed in a month or two at their really beautiful country home in the summer, with a week or less at Easter and Whitsun. When

they came they "polished off," to use their own phrase, all the neighbours in one fell swoop with a huge garden-party, considered their duty done, and thenceforth closed their lovely grounds and house to all but their own house-party, an unrestful swirl of changing men and women. These came like a clockwork machine with a huge pile of luggage, maids, valets, and pets, flung themselves and their belongings over the house and gardens for three or four days, and departed with equal regularity to be replaced by others, differing only in name, never varying in style or type. The host, Mr. Brackenridge, or "Jimmy" as every one called him, the hostess, Mrs. Jimmy also to every one, their son, a guardsman apparently on perpetual leave, and always known as "James," and lastly Muriel, or Moonie, their daughter, were the only unchanging occupants, and they went through their casual duties with a gaiety and extraordinary pretence of enjoyment it would not have been possible to feel.

The Colonel's grievance was this one

An Intrusion—The Gate Opens 11

roped-in garden-party a year for the country folk, and the inundation of imported guests for the rest of the summer. He objected strongly to being classed in with the local doctor, the solicitor from the little country town of Littleborough, and all the dull parsons from all the villages round. He was a Maynard, a good old family, as good as the Brackenridges themselves, and better than most of their guests. He had commanded his regiment in service abroad, a distinguished man in his day. He and his old enemy, Admiral Stodart from Appledene, two miles away, were agreed on this one point. Every year they commanded their womenfolk to refuse the invitation, every year the womenfolk, less foolish, disobeyed; and every year the two old gentlemen had their best clothes well brushed and pressed and accompanied them on the annual pilgrimage, where they both revelled in criticising the whole show, and taking eager mental notes concerning the bedding-out of the gardens.

Nina did not feel inclined to defend the

Netherwood "crowd." Instead, she said with a hint of a mischievous smile:

"Well, you will be able to tackle him yourself on Tuesday at the garden-party—he said he wanted to meet you."

"H'm, did he?" grunted the Colonel. "Well, he may want then. If you think you are going to get me to take you to that school-treat, you're very much mistaken." With which last shot the Colonel stumped out into the garden, syringe in hand, to tackle the enemies of his beloved roses.

Nina went upstairs to her room. If you have pictured the outside of the house and garden, you will know at once what the interior is like. The rooms, low-ceilinged and of cool colouring, a faint smell of pot-pourri about; the hall and staircases hung with war-like trophies of all sorts, from a Chinese god to an Indian tomahawk; the drawing-room full of flowers and a faded rosebud chintz; the dining-room all family portraits and heavy oak; the smoking-room shabbily comfortable, a mass of bookcases, faded photo-

An Intrusion—The Gate Opens 13

graphs, guns, and fishing-rods (not that the Colonel had fished for thirty years, but he liked to have the things of his youth about him, so he said). Upstairs the bedrooms, furnished in old mahogany, lavender-smelling, with well-worn carpets, old-fashioned and simply comfortable.

Nina's own room was the most modern, for it had a dainty white suite of furniture, and shining brass bedstead. This had been the Colonel's surprise for her when she came home from school and put her hair up, ten years ago now. He had thought it all out for himself, made one of his rare visits to London, and bought it at the Army and Navy Stores, and a new blue carpet with it. It had looked a real *débutante's* room, not a schoolgirl's, and Nina's delight took years to wear off, so the Colonel felt that the enormous expenditure had not been wasted. Now that she was older she sometimes looked with half-envious eyes at the really beautiful mahogany in the seldom used spare-rooms, but she never suggested that a change should

be made, for she knew that the Colonel thought of her still as a *débutante*, a young girl just entering the world of which she knew nothing.

Now, in this blue-and-white girl's room, Nina moved about tidying this and that—a woman's way. Then she caught sight of herself in the long glass of the wardrobe, and stopped suddenly before it, half unconsciously, also a woman's way. What she saw was a good figure of medium height, neither thin nor plump, a well-shaped head, clear healthy skin, and bright colour—good grey eyes with strong brows and lashes, and soft wavy chestnut hair pushing out from under the sun-bonnet. Very few women can wear a sun-bonnet and look well in it; it requires a certain poise of the neck, a certain shaped head. Nina had these, therefore she wore a sun-bonnet, and the result was satisfactory. The dark-blue overall was less so—a clumsy affair, stained with earth, too, where she had been kneeling; the gardening shoes also were not becoming. . . . Only a moment she



"STILL KNEELING, HE HELD IT UP TO HER."

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An Intrusion—The Gate Opens 15

stopped, and smiled a little as she turned aside. Then she remembered the cuttings lying disconsolate in the sun, and went placidly back to her work.

She passed up the pergola path, and called out cheerily to the Colonel at work on his roses, then mounting higher, she turned aside at the top of the path into the "garden." It blazed out to meet her. In the border that ran round three sides of it, the giant red poppies were aflare, and the marvellously blue lupins, spiky and erect, reared their stiff stalks above them. White and purple centaureas sprawled their feathery heads and clumsy leaves everywhere, and the multi-coloured violas added their little voices to the clamour. The June sun shone with a deliciousness that only June knows, fresh and warm, with just a hint of reserve in it; the bees hummed and drummed about the flowers, making believe to be very busy.

With a sigh of content, Nina took up the gardening knife again, and snipped a few fresh cuttings, placing them dexterously in

the ground near the old plants. Yet though she never paused in her work, her mind was not in it. Sometimes her thoughts would turn to the stranger who had walked so carelessly through the gate of her sanctuary, and sometimes they turned to pretty Muriel Brackenridge, then to the frock she was going to wear on Tuesday, and the hat which had not yet come, and what on earth she should do if it did n't come. Then back again to the stranger, Peter Marchant, for there was something in the thin, cynical face and whimsical smile that had attracted her—also he was certainly a very odd young man. Though she had not been with him ten minutes, he had impressed himself on her mind, in a way that had never happened to her before with any man. Then she thought suddenly how absurd it was to be dwelling so much on such a little incident, and thought, without any bitterness but rather with amusement, what an uneventful life was hers that so small a thing should set her thinking so much of it. So she promptly put it all right out

An Intrusion—The Gate Opens 17

of her mind, and immediately began thinking about it all over again, another way that women have.

Then the lunch-bell sounded, and she gathered her tools together and went quietly down the path, hoping that the new cook had got the salad right. Passing the rose-garden, she wondered if the roses at Netherwood Hall were really less out than hers.

CHAPTER II

EXPLANATIONS

“**W**HERE have you been to, Peter?”
“What have you been doing?”

“Who is she? . . . sh—sh——”

The fire of questions greeted Peter Marchant as he strolled across the lawn at Netherwood Hall. A mixed group were lounging on various rugs and chairs, whilst one lady, mallet in hand, was making a marvellous break on the croquet-lawn.

Peter did not answer till he came up to the group, dexterously turned James out of a chair, sat in it himself, and took a cigarette out of James's case.

“To answer in order,” he said, lighting a match, “I've been in the woods, I've been walking and swearing. And she's rather

nice." This last in a loud aside to James, who lay placidly in the same attitude into which he had been tumbled.

"Peter, I'm jealous," cried Muriel. "What's the colour of her hair?" Peter looked at her with his curious smile.

"Not quite so nice as yours," he said, and the smile softened at the corners.

Muriel's hair certainly looked lovely in the morning sunlight. It was very fair and soft, and was done exactly according to the fashion of the year—parted in the middle and waved back on either side, with masses of small soft curls clustered at the back. The hours her maid spent getting that natural wave, the cunning pads beneath, the few additional curls tucked in with her own were things of which Peter knew nothing. Had he known he probably would not have cared—what matter the means when the result was so entirely to be desired? That was his attitude, a very excellent one on the whole for all men. Her face was soft and fragile, pretty as a flower, her figure lithe and small,

her eyes blue and rather too wide apart for real beauty, but this gave her always a child-like, rather wistful look, which was helped out by her tiny mouth, with its little droop at the corners. She was always beautifully dressed from head to toe with the greatest (and most expensive) simplicity.

There was nothing to blame in her. She belonged to her age and her environment—but there was a natural simplicity about her in spite of it, which with her flower-like prettiness brought many men to her feet. They never quite believed in it.

Peter was patiently explaining his morning's absence.

“I went up for a stroll in those con-founded woods over there, and I got lost. That is when I swore. I can't help it, Mrs. Jimmy, I did get lost. And just when I was most lost I saw a green path that I had n't yet tried. I went down it, and of course found it led to a gate, a little green gate, and the other side of the gate was somebody's garden. It was not the time to

parley, so I just opened the gate and walked in. At that moment what I had taken to be a clump of blue lupins behind the hedge got up and resolved itself into the witch. I nearly died of fright."

"The witch?" screamed the group.

"Oh, didn't I say there was a witch in the story?" said Peter, imperturbably. "You might have known it when I said there was a little green gate. Where there is a little green gate you may be sure there is a witch about."

"Was she very angry?"

"Very. But I hurriedly repeated all the charms I could remember, and she turned gradually into a beautiful woman, who took me by the hand (only metaphorically speaking, Moonie, it's all right), and led me through a wonderful garden—till I suddenly found myself on the road again, and in time for lunch."

Peter's fairy story was suddenly interrupted by a scream from the lady on the croquet-lawn.

"I've missed—I've missed a mallet's length off. Jimmy, I've broken down." With a face of wild and absorbed tragedy, Mrs. Willoughby-Lang agitated herself across the lawn.

"Never mind, Mrs. Will, you've done splendidly," said Mr. Brackenridge, making room for her in the group. "Four hoops and a stick. It's yellow to play."

Yellow, a miscellaneous species of husband, moved disconsolately across the lawn. Those people were all very harmless, and very useless. There was no more vice in them than there is in the majority of mankind. They were not puppets of a fast set, in fact a thinking mind (it may have been Peter Marchant's) had described them as remarkably slow. The women's world was bounded by perpetual talking of people, clothes, and the lighter novels, with Croquet and Bridge as their two real absorptions, the men's horizon being the perpetual pursuit of sport, the making of as much money as possible in the shortest and easiest way, or eking out their

present incomes in such a manner as to secure the maximum of enjoyment with the minimum of trouble. They varied the programme slightly, but at heart all were the same. No harm in them, only insufferably stupid. Peter Marchant had thought this of them when he first drifted into their set, and he believed himself one of them at heart, with just a cranky turn in him that looked for something better. He had brains, had Peter, and knew it in an amused sort of way. He had always had plenty of money, and when his father died he found himself really well off. Whimsically, he regretted this at times, for if he had had to work for his living, he felt he could have turned his brains to account. Then the thought of how intensely he would have hated to sell his time and brain for money made him always thank his stars for things as they were. So he dabbled in a job in the Home Office and let things slide.

Then came his engagement to Muriel Brackenridge. He never quite knew how it

happened. He never remembered falling in love with her; he was thirty-five, she twenty-one. But they met, were always meeting; he was with her perpetually. He loved her prettiness, her dainty ways—the wide-eyed simplicity of her. He liked James, her brother, he liked the whole family in fact. It was time he married. Then he never deliberately gave the matter a second thought, but made up his mind uncontrollably to marry her. He found it easier than he expected. An afternoon at Hurlingham gave the opportunity, the psychological moment. She accepted him, the family accepted him, and there was nothing else to do but to sit down and wait for the wedding, which Mrs. Jimmy fixed for the autumn. It all seemed a little dull. That he was marrying without love did not occur to him. Love itself had never come his way, was not likely to, he thought. There were several women he had liked immensely, but nothing had ever gone beyond that with him.

Moonie was different; he liked to think in

sentimental moments that all that dainty prettiness would belong to him soon, just as that nice Mrs. Renton belonged to young Paul, who didn't half deserve her. The Rentons were a newly married couple, staying at Netherwood then, and Peter observed them in his humorously cynical way, wondering if he and Moonie would appear to others as they did to him.

As for Muriel, she took Peter as a matter of course. He was always nice, unselfish, and easy-going. Her engagement was a very happy time for her. It was nice to have Peter always in the background, always there. She felt sometimes that there were depths in his mind which it might be rather uncomfortable to have to probe, but the moment was the thing for her, and for the moment he was all that he should be. Their friends had expected the engagement, and received it with congratulations. The trousseau was a matter of great thrill, and was being thought out and discussed at all odd moments of the day. Peter's ring had been lovely, and all

his other presents were the admiration and jealousy of all her girl friends.

It was all satisfactory, and happy, and as it should be.

After lunch Peter and Moonie strolled away from the rest. They were very matter-of-fact and placidly happy together, but seldom saw each other really alone. As it was, the party jeered at them from the terrace, and implored them not to forget the time completely, as the motors were ordered for three o'clock.

Moonie turned, laughing disdainfully.

"We're not that sort, are we, Peter?" she said, smiling up at him.

"Good lord, no," said Peter cheerfully; "silly asses."

Into the rose-garden they wandered, for it was a secluded part of the garden, shut in by high hedges of clipped yew. They sat on the white-painted teak seat, and he played with her hands, little plump white hands, with the new ring shining and glancing saucily on the third finger.

"Moonie," he said suddenly, "I wonder why on earth you are going to marry me?"

"Because I love you," she answered very softly.

"What do you know about love, child?"

"Lots, of course."

"How?"

"I don't know how. Of course one just knows."

"I wish I knew more about the thing."

"Why?"

"To love you better," he said simply.

"Don't you love me, Peter?" The little hands were pulled away from him. His answer was to seize the hands again in both his, and bending, kiss them passionately. "Peter can be really rather nice sometimes," was the description of this given afterwards to her best friend.

All this was playing, playing prettily on a summer's afternoon.

"I shall be sorry when we go back to town," he said presently.

"Will you, Peter? You know I shall be

rather glad. I'm just longing to begin getting my trousseau things. Mummy and I have been having awful fights over them already, and there's such a lot coming on you know, dances every night, and loads of Bridge parties and things."

"Yes, and where do I come in?" asked Peter, grimly.

"Oh, Peter, you'll be there, of course, won't you? And you'll come to the dances and things, with me? I've promised to bring you to ever so many——"

"Right O, I suppose it must be done . . . but all the same I'd much rather stay here with you."

"And how on earth should I get my trousseau ready by October—I can't quite be married without a trousseau, can I? Besides, after all, we shall come down just before Goodwood, and have two whole months here off and on."

"Well, well, there are worse holes than London, I suppose," he said resignedly; "five more days then."

The voices of the others already called them from the lawn. They rose to go.

"By Jove, I believe I told a fib to Miss Maynard," said Peter suddenly, as they strolled out through the rose-garden. "I said these roses were hardly out at all, and there is a perfect blaze of them."

"Oh, it was the Maynard's garden you broke into this morning, was it? I remember going there once with mother to call. I don't remember much about her, though. Was she the beautiful witch-woman you were so absurd about at lunch?"

"She is a good-looking woman."

"I suppose she must have been once."

"Why, is she so old?" asked Peter, with his quizzical smile.


"Oh, yes, she must be. She's been out ever since I remember her."

"That of course makes her very old, poor woman," he agreed seriously.

That evening, when the men joined the ladies, and all collected mechanically round the Bridge tables, it so happened that the

hostess, Mrs. Jimmy, and Mrs. Willoughby-Lang cut out. Now Mrs. Willoughby-Lang, her friends said, only became human after dinner. The rest of the day she was simply a fiend—a Croquet-fiend. She came down in the morning in her rubber shoes, ready to pounce on the first unwary victim that presented itself. She would tease and worry the whole party perpetually till her match was made up, and then would play a slow, careful, and absorbed game till lunch-time. All lunch she discussed the game. "If you had n't made that miss from balk at the third hoop, when yellow was near the stick," etc., etc., or "If red had hit black first that time, and taken a rush off blue down to yellow's hoop, we should have romped in with the last three and won the game," and so on. Then after lunch she would challenge another unfortunate, allow no way of escape, if possible elude the arranged expedition, or if compelled to go, would rush to the croquet-lawn on her return, and play with the zeal of a soul set free, till five minutes before

dinner, to the agony of her victims, the nature of whose hair compelled them to do it again (Mrs. Willoughby's was a fixture, so such considerations did not bother her). All through dinner she would again discuss the game, recall past victories or defeats, and spot her victims for the morrow. Then after dinner she became human, a really charming woman, full of common-sense and shrewdness. Mrs. Brackenridge was forty-five, but did not look it. Her chief characteristic, no doubt satisfactory to herself but apt to be wearying to her friends, was an immeasurable admiration of all those things which were hers. She was never tired of exploiting Jimmy's perfections as a husband. "Jimmy is so good about it," was her pet phrase. There never had been such a boy as James; the marvellous way in which the whole regiment relied on him, from the colonel to the smallest drummer, was surprising to learn when one observed how frequently James was on leave. Muriel, of course, was the success of the London season, and Muriel's clothes the



perfection of all things. "You should have seen her at the so-and-so's, my dear; the whole room was in raptures." Netherwood Hall was the show place of the county; people ought really to come down and see the flower-beds, they beat the parks hollow—and so on. No harm in it really, and many people were genuinely fond of Mrs. Jimmy.

These two ladies then had cut out from the Bridge table and strolled out on to the terrace.

"Tell me about Muriel, my dear," said the elder lady. "I really have n't seen you since it was announced. And Peter is my godson, you know."

"Dear Moonie, yes, she is so happy," purred Mrs. Jimmy. "Don't you think she looks rather sweet in that little blue ninon frock to-night? Only ten, my dear, from that little woman I told you about; she is a wonder, really."

"Moonie always looks sweet. But tell me about the engagement? Is it what you wanted?" Mrs. Willoughby-Lang rather

thought Mrs. Jimmy had aimed "higher" for her little treasure.

"Oh, dear Peter is just the man for her, you know. He *is* such a dear, and of course well off, you know—*very* well off. Of course there is no title, or anything of that sort, and I assure you Moonie might have had her pick—but there, girls always know their own minds nowadays, and she is devoted to him."

"I have always liked Peter Marchant in a way . . . but I must confess I'm never at all sure that he is n't laughing at us all. He has such an odd smile."

Mrs. Jimmy, who never really listened to any one but herself, pitched as usual on one word.

"Odd, my dear? Oh, Peter would never do anything odd . . . not like that young Paul Renton, who they do say . . ." here her voice dropped, and she glanced apprehensively at the open window behind her. "However, . . . Peter is a dear good fellow and devoted to Moonie. You saw that bracelet he gave her? Was n't it exquisite? Such

pearls in it! . . . I've never seen a girl with such presents from her fiancé. I shall have to spend no end on her trousseau . . . only waiting for this dreadful Whitsun holiday to be over to go up and begin it in earnest."

And the talk plunged suddenly into the intricacies of clothes and dressmakers, while the June night floated over the garden unnoticed, hiding the flare of the beds, drawing the summer scents from the secret flowers. Not quite unnoticed, though.

As at last the talk died away and the two ladies turned to go indoors, Mrs. Willoughby suddenly observed a man standing by himself on the terrace, leaning against a vase and looking down into the dark garden. Then a light from an upper window shone on his face. She saw it was Peter, Peter without the mask of cynicism, Peter as none of those inside knew him. She turned hurriedly away with a sudden sense of intrusion, intolerable to a true woman, and her glance fell on Muriel, still seated inside at the Bridge table, playing with business-like coolness, a little pile of

silver, and even gold, beside her, showing her winnings. (Muriel was tremendously lucky, and played a good game as well, her friends popularly supposing her to dress on her Bridge winnings.) She looked dainty and sweet as ever, the absurdly simple blue ninon making her seem like a child putting her hair up for fun—a child, but for that cool thoughtful way in which she played the cards, absorbed in the game.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang paused a second, looking at her, her shrewdness and common-sense alert.

“Those two—good heavens: those two,” she thought to herself, “won’t they make a mess of it!”

Then she suddenly allowed herself to be swept in to a table, though she hated Bridge and played badly, for sheer terror that if left alone she would go out and tell Peter what a fool he was.

But Peter Marchant, under the spell of the June night, in some vague and confused way was already thinking the same thought.

CHAPTER III

THE "SCHOOL-TREAT"

THE "school-treat," as the Colonel petulantly called it, was in full swing.

Do you know these once-a-year garden-parties given by the great houses to the neighbourhood? They are wonderful affairs, and it is only at them and other such country functions that one realises how physically ugly the English nation is. It is a sad, incomprehensible fact that people who live in the country degenerate in appearance, whatever may become of their morals. Where on earth they get their clothes and their notions from is a marvellous thing and well worth studying. Who could have perpetrated them? Some of them—the clothes I mean—are obviously new, but even those that are old were

new once, and why, why have they ever had them made like that? It is a strange and deep question.

Mrs. Jimmy stood outside on the terrace, receiving her victims. She wore a mauve gown and an *empressé* manner, both specially produced for the occasion. As each new-comer stalked, sidled, or waddled up to her, she bestowed a beaming smile and a firm handshake, and if there was a pause in the stream, a remark, always the same, about the weather. Allowing this to happen once a year, people were justified in replying to strangers that certainly, of course, they knew dear Mrs. Brackenridge quite well, and referring to "the last time they were over at Netherwood."

A motley collection of guests. Parsons and their wives and their daughters—the wives shapeless in black silk, the daughters, also shapeless, in neat coloured coats and skirts, usually in rather a bright blue, and hats with pink roses on them. It almost appears to be a uniform. Doctors and their

wives, the latter always flat in biscuit-coloured voile, with insertion of imitation lace running in lines downwards. Then a sprinkling of the more select "county" folk, in their last year's best gowns . . . these, I suppose, would not waste their good frocks on such a mixed crowd . . . and a makeweight of retired naval and military families, who, after a gay and strenuous life in the thick of garrison towns, came to drag out the remainder of their retired existence in the dull seclusion of the country, where you can get a bigger house for your money. Such were Mrs. Jimmy's victims. A band of the local Territorials played under the terrace and two tents provided tea and fruit; having done this much and shaken hands without ceasing for three-quarters of an hour, the hostess considered her duty done.

Mrs. Admiral Stodart stood near the tea-tent endeavouring to eat jam sandwiches, balance a teacup and sunshade, and talk to the mother of the Vicar of Littleborough at the same time. They were intent on their



"THE 'SCHOOL-TREAT,' AS THE COLONEL PETULANTLY CALLED IT,
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fellow-guests' frocks and were enjoying themselves immensely. These ladies had not always been friends. There had been a time when they were excessively sweet to each other, scrupulously polite over girls' friendlies, charity bazaars, and other usual bones of contention in the country, and the sweetness had hidden much venom. This was at the period when Mrs. Admiral's sailor son and Mrs. Vicar's clerical son had been paying frequent visits to the White House on the flimsiest of excuses. In other words, Nina Maynard had been the bone of contention, for it is the inborn desire of every woman to see her son married to the nicest girl in the neighbourhood. Nina had helped the Vicar with his choir-treats, and boated with the sailor, but the only result was that the sailor had gone off to sea and the Vicar for a Polytechnic Tour in Switzerland, and both had returned, shaken hands, and laughed ruefully together; henceforth the frequent visits to the White House became to each a thing of the past, and Nina continued

to live her quiet garden life in serene solitude.

Then the two ladies had made it up, that is, they permitted themselves to differ in opinion on most topics, came to tea in a friendly way to criticise each other's methods, and were generally to be found in each other's pockets at all social gatherings; good women, both.

It was Mrs. Admiral who first saw them.

" . . . And how she can have the face to come here after that— My dear, who's Nina Maynard got hold of?"

The Vicar's mother was short-sighted; she had to manipulate her jam sandwich, sunshade, and teacup, to get hold of her glasses in order to observe the newcomers.

"I don't know," she decided; "never saw him before in my life."

"No one from these parts, I'm sure. How exciting! . . . We must ask the Colonel."

Two people strolled across the lawn towards the tent, unconscious of the interest they had aroused in the maternal hearts of

the two good ladies. Nina, who never dressed in the fashion, but always in a simple picture style of her own immensely becoming to her, looked almost beautiful in pale grey with a large black hat, and a bunch of mal-maisons at her waist. With her you never knew whether her clothes were in the fashion or not, for she "put them on well," as women say, and never exaggerated anything. Her clothes always seemed part of her, an admirable thing in women, not often found. It was Peter who strolled beside her, taking her to have some tea, Moonie being busy beside her mother receiving the congratulations of many who had not seen her since the announcement.

"Be an angel and take some one to have tea," she had whispered to Peter, and seeing Nina Maynard and her father shaking hands with Mrs. Jimmy at that moment he had effected his introduction and obeyed with good grace. The Colonel had started out with them, accepting almost genially Peter's apologies for his intrusion, since they were

served up with a tactful remark on the beauty of his roses, but he had been pounced upon by his enemy the Admiral, and been plunged at once into a bitter and violent discussion on the merits of certain rival insecticides.

So Peter and Nina Maynard came together to the tea-tent, and the two good gossips wove at once marvellous romances concerning them, only to be shattered by a third lady, a girl a few years older than Nina, with a flat figure, straggly hair, glasses, and a baby muslin frock, who joining the duet said:

"What do you think of Muriel Brackenridge's young man?"

"Where is he?" said the two, in a breath.

Stragglyhair sniffed, an important sniff.

"Over there, with his back to us—with Nina Maynard."

"Oh—h," glasses went up.

"I must say, I wonder Nina can't do better than get some one else's fiancé to give her tea; she must be hard up for a man." Stragglyhair had had no tea herself and felt

it badly—but she would rather go without all the afternoon than be seen having it alone.

"What is he like?" Both ladies detested Stragglyhair, but this was too interesting to miss.

"Oh, very dull, I should think—cross-looking and rather pleased with himself— Oh, there's the Doctor," and Stragglyhair made a dive, wreathed in smiles, for a possible fish.

"Odious person," commented Mrs. Admiral.

"Poor thing," sighed the Vicar's mother.

Then the glasses were up again, and Nina's second plate of strawberries was noted down.

"They seem to have plenty to say to each other, seeing that he is engaged to another girl."

"Dear Nina is so silent usually."

"Perhaps they are old friends—she may have met him at her aunt's in town."

"Oh, yes, no doubt that's it. What a pity Muriel—oh, well——"

"They must be old friends," said poor

Mrs. Vicar, almost uncomfortably, for Peter and Nina, having finished their tea, were moving off in the direction of the Rosary.

"It is really quite true," he was saying plaintively, "I do take an intelligent interest in roses. I know quite a lot of their names—Dorothy Eckford, Buff Orpington, Frank Dolby——"

"Those are all sweet peas and chickens," rang Nina's answer contemptuously.

The Rosary at Netherwood is, as I have said, the most secluded part of the gardens, unless one counts the lake, and there one can find delicious cool little bays, overhung by willows, where a boat may lie unseen from shore or water; but except for this, the Rosary is the only part of the large grounds where the human touch is at all manifest. For this was evidently built years ago for the delight of young lovers, and the evasion of the outer world. Even to-day, when the grounds were swarming with prying eyes and obtrusive feet, the Rosary lay apart unto itself, secluded. Stragglyhair, it

is true, tried artlessly to inveigle first the Doctor, then the junior Curate, and lastly the old Colonel himself, to escort her thither, but without success, so Peter and Nina found themselves alone therein.

A wonderful place is a rose-garden on a summer afternoon, even with the local Territorial band thrashing out Sousa in the near distance—a place of contour and scent and colour.

The Netherwood Rosary was formal but charming. At either end were deep curved seats of white-painted wood—very comfortable even in their woodiness. Peter gravitated naturally towards them—he always did in the Rosary, and Nina followed him, longing to take in the whole beauty of the mass of bloom.

They had plenty to say to each other; the barrier of strangerhood never seemed to have existed between them. The little green gate, through which Peter had passed boldly the first time they met, may have had something to do with it.

Time flew in the Rosary. . . .

Nina gathered herself together.

"It is delightful here—not a bit like a garden-party, but I must really go and find my father."

Muriel suddenly flew back to Peter's mind, but he smiled whimsically at the thought that he could have forgotten her, even for a few minutes. With faint misgivings, just something of the truant feeling coming over them, they strolled down the paths.

Then a little incident happened which shows that offenders, however slight, seldom get off scot free.

Nina caught sight of a rose that she had never seen before, a little slip of a bush-rose with beautiful uncommon blooms on it. She cried out at its beauty, and Peter knelt down on the path to examine the little zinc label for its name.

"*Dawn*," he said; "you must have a bloom of it to take back and show the Colonel." And taking out his knife he cut her a beauty.

Still kneeling, he held it up to her, and she, taking it naturally, put it up to her face to smell.

It was at this moment that two ladies, unable to resist the Rosary any longer, had just arrived at the cut in the yew hedge that forms an archway into the garden.

What the scene conveyed to them was simply a man kneeling before a girl, offering her a rose which she put to her lips.

"My dear, we had better go," said Mrs. Admiral uncomfortably.

They turned and fled, back to the crowd, band, and the tents.

Then the Vicar's mother trusted herself to speak.

"Disgraceful," she snorted. (You know what a Vicar's mother's snort is like, don't you? It is impossible for your reputation to stand up against it.) "I must say I should never have thought Nina was that kind of girl."

Both ladies put the worst possible construction on the incident. It never occurred

to either of them, good souls, that, had Peter been making love to Nina, he would not have been on his knees, offering her a rose, unless he had been rehearsing a play.

"What shall we do about it?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing—surely," answered Mrs. Admiral hastily, in a panic.

"We shall have to see," said Mrs. Vicar, grimly—meaning the two unwitting culprits, strolling back from the Rosary, had a great surprise in store for them.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang had insisted on organising a Ten-minute Croquet Tournament for the unwilling guests—quite an innovation at the Netherwood school-treat. She had darted hither and thither, followed by a bored and rebellious James, seizing on all the likely and unlikely folk she could find, and enlisting them for her malicious purpose. In doing so she had come up to Colonel Maynard and suddenly broken off in the middle of her question, with a little scream.

"It's Colonel Maynard—surely—of the—th, is n't it? Don't you remember me?"

The Colonel beamed; he liked to be reminded of his regiment, and the old gay days in India.

"You're quite right, it's myself. . . . Now don't tell me—I can't place you . . . let me see . . . let me see. . . . Why, you're Mrs. Tomlinson to be sure." And the old Colonel held out his hand, still beaming.

"Oh, I was . . . poor Tommy, you know, died years ago. . . . I'm Mrs. Willoughby-Lang now."

"Er . . . yes, of course—poor Tommy . . . ahem. . . . Well, I'm delighted to see you again."

"Oh, we must have a chat—bother this Tournament—here, James, we've got enough. Do sort out these names for me and collect the people and start them playing in pairs. I'll come and see how it's getting on presently."

James, looking perfectly blank, took the list with a murmur of eternal fidelity, and made his way to the tea-tent, where, finding the only pretty girl on the lawn looking as

if she wanted some strawberries, he suddenly remembered his duties as host.

The two old friends sat down on the nearest seats, and entered into an animated recollection of old days in Simla, when Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was a young leader of society—that was before the Croquet craze had attracted her so distressingly—and the Colonel had been the popular colonel commanding one of the crack regiments . . . That was thirty years ago. All that each could think now was how the other had aged.

Peter and Nina coming back from the Rosary found them there, and Nina was introduced; she had not existed in the Simla days.

Peter slipped away to find Muriel. She scolded and chaffed him for his absence, and he serenely protested that he had not been at all bored, which was the truth. . . . Then they went together to the fruit tent.

People stay long at the Netherwood school-treat, it is one of their characteristics, but longer than any stayed Mrs. Vicar and Mrs.

Admiral; the latter lady even insisted on the Admiral driving the Vicar away in his rumbling four-wheeled cart, while she and Mrs. Vicar shared the village cab between them. The only satisfaction they got out of it was to see Nina and the Colonel, Muriel Brackenridge and her fiancé, Mrs. Willoughby-Lang and the hostess standing in an animated group together, impregnable it seemed to the outer world.

Stragglyhair (she was usually last to go everywhere), passing the two good ladies on her way to say good-bye, remarked pleasantly to them, "The Maynards seem quite to have been taken up by the Netherwood set. There'll be no holding Nina now,"—a remark as ridiculous as might have been expected of her. But Stragglyhair's facetious manner seemingly belied the injustice.

"Odious person," commented Mrs. Admiral.

"Poor thing," sighed the Vicar's mother.

Then seeing that there was nothing else to do, they reluctantly ordered the village cab.

CHAPTER IV

A TEA-PARTY AND ITS EFFECT

THUS it came about that the following day one of the Netherwood motors sizzled up the drive of the White House, and stopping at the door disgorged Mrs. Wilmoughby-Lang, Muriel Brackenridge, and Peter Marchant.

Nina was in the drawing-room to receive them, cool and simple as the room itself, and this was the acme of perfection for a summer afternoon. There were big bowls of sweet peas everywhere, and mignonette, old-fashioned and faint smelling, and these fresh flowers, mingling with the faint scent of pot-pourri which clung about the room, produced an atmosphere of peace and well-being. The outside blinds were drawn, giving a dim,

cool light within, and there stole over Peter Marchant, always curiously susceptible to physical influences, a sense of comfort and content which he found lacking in the big unhomely rooms at Netherwood, and a sweetness utterly unattainable in his bachelor rooms in town. He found himself silent while the others talked in pairs, and in his silence wondered vaguely if the house in which he and Muriel were to live could ever attain this cool sweetness, this essence of contentment. He looked across at her, and wondered anew at her dainty prettiness, thinking that she grew more lovely every time he looked at her. But with such a room as this? She was as simply dressed as any village girl, and yet even Peter, little versed in such things, realised that that simplicity was dangerous. The material of her dress was nothing, just a cotton that any one might have had, no trimming but a little collar of lace, yet there was that about it which made it as different from the village girl's as an elaborate ball-dress would have been. (Peter

could not define it, but any woman would have known that it was cut, nothing else.) Somehow the dress did not go into such a room as this, quite. He glanced over at Nina answering some question. Yes, she belonged to the room—not unlikely, by the way, since the room belonged to her. There was an atmosphere of coolness, of quiet light, of faint, homely flowers about her, as she talked. There would never be that about Muriel. She was the gaily-flitting butterfly, the thing of a day, of an hour. He caught a delicious view of her profile, and thrilled secretly at the thought that soon all that daintiness would be his own. He was wonderfully lucky, he thought. Then, suddenly overwhelming him, there came the thought that had struck him on the terrace a few nights ago, when Muriel had sat inside absorbed in her Bridge. For the sake of possessing this dainty being, this butterfly beauty, he was selling his liberty of thought, word, and deed, giving his soul for her dalliance—for, like many cynics, Peter had in

the bottom of his heart high-flown ideals of the married state. And in return, what kind of companionship, what kind of love would he get from her? Life was not all playing in a rose-garden on a summer afternoon. . . . Good heavens, what was the matter with him? What was he thinking of . . . it must be the room . . . it seemed full of thoughts and dreams. . . .

"Will you have some more tea, Mr. Marchant?"

"... Er . . . no, thanks. . . ." Peter woke up suddenly.

"Like myself, eh? Never touch tea—pernicious stuff." The Colonel put Mrs. Willoughby-Lang's cup on the table.

"Shall we go out then? I should like you to see our roses, Miss Brackenridge, though we can't hope to rival yours at Netherwood, in spite of Mr. Marchant's assurance."

Peter laughed and rose, glad to get away from the uncompromising calmness of the room.

"I still hold to my opinion, Miss May-

nard," he said, "and I am sure Muriel will back me up when she sees them."

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang also rose. "Have you a croquet-lawn?" she asked. She had enjoyed her chat with her old friend, and the recalling of old times, but like the drug-fiend, the Croquet-fiend also has her cravings to contend against.

"We use our only lawn for tennis, I'm afraid," said Nina, smiling.

"Ah, what a pity. . . . I should have enjoyed a game against you, Colonel Maynard—we were old opponents in the Simla days, were n't we?"

"Never played since—they're all too good for me nowadays," said the Colonel. "If you would take me in hand now, eh? I used to beat you at the end in the old days—know I did."

The party went out into the garden, and up the pergola-covered path.

On reaching the tennis-lawn, Mrs. Willoughby-Lang screamed with delight. "What a lawn—oh, what a waste of lawn," she cried.

“It’s full size—I’m certain it’s full size. Let’s measure it and see.”

She had ceased to be a charming woman, and became all Croquet-fiend. Thenceforth she was absorbed—stepping with what she imagined to be three-foot strides over every possible width of the lawn, explaining to the Colonel, who followed bewildered and bored, exactly where the hoops, sticks, balk-line, and what-not should come; the best make of hoops, the only balls on the market, and so on.

Peter and the two women went on up to the rose-garden. He was not at ease, for some reason, with them together, and not enjoying himself. This made him more cynical, less amusing, far less attractive, Nina thought, than he had been the day before at Netherwood. Yet with that intuition that was hers she divined the cause, knowing that Muriel was not at her best. She was sorry for it, thinking in some vague way it was her own fault as hostess. As a matter of fact, Muriel, perhaps for the first time in

her life, felt shy. The older woman impressed her with such calm, such quiet gentleness, and yet seemed to be so much more Peter's equal in conversation. Muriel was suddenly and uncontrollably jealous. This woman, living this dull life that she had so airily despised, even brainless little Muriel realised, had a life of her own, a kingdom apart from the world as Muriel knew it, and somehow Muriel's world seemed unnecessary, small, and pigmy-minded beside it. It annoyed her to feel the older woman's quiet, utterly unconscious superiority, and annoyance is not good for the temper of any of us. The child grew sharp, imperious with Peter, almost patronising with Nina. And the more she became so, the more did Nina and Peter unconsciously leave her out of their conversation, and Muriel realised that Peter too was of Nina's world. "But he is of mine too—I don't know him like this," was the gist of her unshaped thought.

Then, almost by force, the Colonel headed Mrs. Willoughby-Lang off the tennis-lawn,

they joined the others, he vehemently and tersely protesting against the turning of his lawn into a croquet ground, since it would involve the sacrifice of a precious rock-border that in the moments spared from the roses was his great pride and delight. It was a welcome diversion to Muriel, and Mrs. Willoughby-Lang remembering with a scream that she had promised to be back in time to give Jimmy his revenge of their morning's game, the motor came round to whiz the party back to Netherwood.

The afternoon was not a success, though Mrs. Willoughby-Lang departed with protests that they must all meet again, that Nina must come and visit her in town, and that she would come and stay with them next summer, but that they must, positively must, make that beautiful lawn into a croquet ground before she came. Also, there were polite hopes from Muriel that Nina would visit them in town or at Netherwood. Peter shook hands in silence, save that when the ladies were in the motor and the Colonel

having a last word at the door, he said to Nina, with that whimsical smile of his:

"You did not show us that garden at the top where you work."

"No," said Nina smiling, "there is a notice-board there 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.'"

"Are you going to prosecute me?"

"It was a first offence; I think there is a law letting you off for that."

"It may not be the last—one never knows—these woods are very tricky."

"Have you no bump of locality?"

"Not very strongly developed. It is an elastic bump."

"What nonsense are you talking, Peter? Come along." Muriel's voice was sweet and friendly, but there was a hard look in her eyes. She dubbed Nina mentally as a designing cat.

The drive home was not successful. Mrs. Willoughby-Lang could talk of nothing but the wasted croquet ground, and the advancing years of her old friend the Colonel. Muriel

was critical of the room, Nina's dress, and other things—Peter half amused with her, half annoyed, as one might be with a spoilt child. He was vaguely regretful that she should have moods like these, and determined to win her out of it.

"Moonie," he said, as they joined the party on the lawn, and Mrs. Willoughby-Lang seizing her mallet and her victim, the good-natured Jimmy, made for the croquet-lawn. "Moonie, are you coming for a stroll with me? It is our last evening here."

"How can I, Peter? Mother will be so cross if I don't go and look after the Rentons. They and James want me to make up a tennis four."

"Chuck them," said Peter, without looking at her.

"I can't, Peter, mother would be so cross. She did n't half like us going off to White House this afternoon."

"Very well. Come after dinner then. I want you."

"What for?"

"Come after dinner."

"I'll try."

"Promise?"

"I can't promise. There's Bridge."

"Damn Bridge."

"Peter! I thought you were so keen."

"On what?"

"Bridge."

"Only Bridge? Is that all you thought I was keen on?"

"And—and doing what I like, the things I like, I mean."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, no. Peter, you are an old goose." He had then both her hands, and bent suddenly to kiss them. "Let me go . . . every one is looking."

"Oh, damn every one," said Peter lightly, and let them go.

"Peter, when you've finished giving us an imitation of George Alexander making love, do let Moonie change her shoes for tennis."

James's drawl came softly over the lawn.

"James, I hate you. Peter does n't often indulge his prerogatives."

Moonie, rather pink, came over to her brother and deftly punched his head.

Peter, smiling grimly, went into the house.

After dinner there was the usual gathering at the Bridge tables, as the men came into the room. Peter went straight to Muriel.

"Are you coming out?"

"Do you want me to very much?"

"Yes."

"All right."

"Moonie, come and cut in here, will you? Mrs. Willoughby does n't want to play."

"Oh," Muriel hesitated. "I must go, must n't I, Peter?"

"No," in a low voice, "you must come out."

"Come along, Moonie. Hurry up—same four as last night, and a chance to win back your fiver."

Peter's eyes were on her, compelling eyes, rather steely grey.

"I will try and cut out after one rubber. Wait for me," she said nervously, and fled.

Peter made his way alone to the open French windows. He always flatly refused to play on the hot summer nights, and being a privileged person, Mrs. Jimmy never worried him.

Outside the night was soft and dark, only the light of the growing moon. The scent of the flowers came up to him as he stood on the terrace, looking down into the garden. Inside the room was a contrast. Brilliant lights, bright colouring of the women's frocks, set off by the black and white of the men. The eager folk at the tables playing almost silently, but with bursts of talk and laughter as a game finished. Once or twice he turned impatiently to look for Muriel. She sat at a table near the window, young Paul Renton her partner, playing a little less coolly than usual, her face flushed and nervous. Peter, unseen, watched her intently, and the glamour of the night being on him, fell to wondering what on earth the woman behind that sweet, flushed face was to him—what they were to each other in the eternal scheme

of things. He saw his ring on her finger, flashing and dancing with her quick little hands, and realised slowly that that ring bound her to him—made her his property in the future. Equally, he reflected, it bound him to her, made him hers, to the exclusion of all other women. And it came to him how preposterous it was—this light taking in hand of an immense proposition. Then the scent of the flowers came wafting to him, stirring other thoughts and longings. He watched her suddenly with new interest—the soft hair, so faultlessly done, the curve of her neck and shoulders, the white arms and little hands. This was his—his own property-to-be—and she sat there playing, playing, playing with the stupid trumpery cards. It was not right—she must come to him—out of that glare of light, talk, and laughter; out of the crowd and colours . . . into the quiet of the dim cool garden . . . into the silence, alone with him. He wanted her. . . . Immersed in his thought, he made a sudden quick movement towards her. She looked up and saw

him standing there in the darkness, and the expression on his face was one she did not know. She flushed slowly, right down to her neck. It was her turn to play. With nervous quickness she flung a card down, and lost the trick. I
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Uncontrollably, Paul Renton's goggle eyes and mouth made three round O's.

"That's given us the game and the rubber," said James, who was playing against her, laying down his hand. "What the dickens were you doing, Moonie? You knew the Queen was in?"

"I . . . I don't know . . . thought she was out, I suppose. I'm so sorry, Mr. Renton."

"Oh, never mind," said young Paul with unconvincing indifference, "there's not much in it."

"H'm . . . and twenty-four is one hundred and forty . . . that's a fiver she's let you in for, my son," said James with brotherly candour.

Muriel rose hurriedly. "I'm so sorry . . .

I'm too hot to play . . . mother's finished her rubber . . . she'll make you a better partner, Mr. Renton."

She slipped out of the French windows to Peter, who had drawn back into the shade.

"Oh, Peter," she whispered, with something that was almost a sob, "I played so badly . . . I . . . I . . . wanted to come out to you . . . but it has cost me another fiver, Peter dear."

"Never mind the beastly Bridge . . . you've come to me . . . I wanted you . . . let's go out on the lake . . ."

He drew her close to him with a thrill, and she nestled in, content.

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Under the moon the punt skimmed over the water, Muriel curled up on the cushions, Peter in the stern using the paddle silently. The night was soft and warm, the water lay dim and invisible around them, save that the moon made a path of shimmering silver across it, and the reflections of the stars, held

deep down in the water, made here and there a sense of unfathomable depths.

Presently Peter shipped the paddle, let the boat drift where it would, and stepping over the seat dropped down beside Muriel. Neither moved for a while.

Peter spoke softly, touching her hair with his fingers.

"Moonie, do you know that your hair is like little spiders' webs all made of gold? Who spun it for you, Moonie?"

The girl stirred a little in her seat, but made no answer.

"Moonie, do you know that your face is like a flower out of the garden . . . just as soft, as delicate as a petal? . . . I think the whole of you is just a flower come to life."

He flung his arm over her, and she closed her eyes. With his lips close to hers he whispered more to her of the foolish things that women never think foolish, till afterwards, and men probably never think of again.

Passionately, burningly, he whispered . . .

Then the girl woke. From her passive, half-shuddering lethargy, she swiftly turned, clung to him, drawing him nearer her; she lifted her soft mouth to his. Their lips met in one long clinging kiss, and they lost sight of time, space, and eternity.

Then came revulsion. It was Peter who suddenly, swiftly drew away from her, sickness and disgust in his heart. A terrible, sudden revulsion of feeling came over him. Without a word he climbed swiftly over the cushions into the stern, and seizing the paddle sent the punt flying over the water. It had drifted towards the landing-place and a few strokes brought her alongside. He sprang out.

The girl lay still as he had left her, with closed eyes.

"Come," he said peremptorily, "it is very late."

She stood up as in a dream. He was securing the punt at the other end, and did not touch her as she stepped out.

They walked back quickly and in silence.

On the terrace he hesitated, then turned to her.

"Forget to-night," he said shortly, and the ghost of his whimsical smile hovered over his thin lips—a desperate effort to put things on their old footing.

"No, I shall remember," she answered simply. It was a Muriel he did not know that spoke.

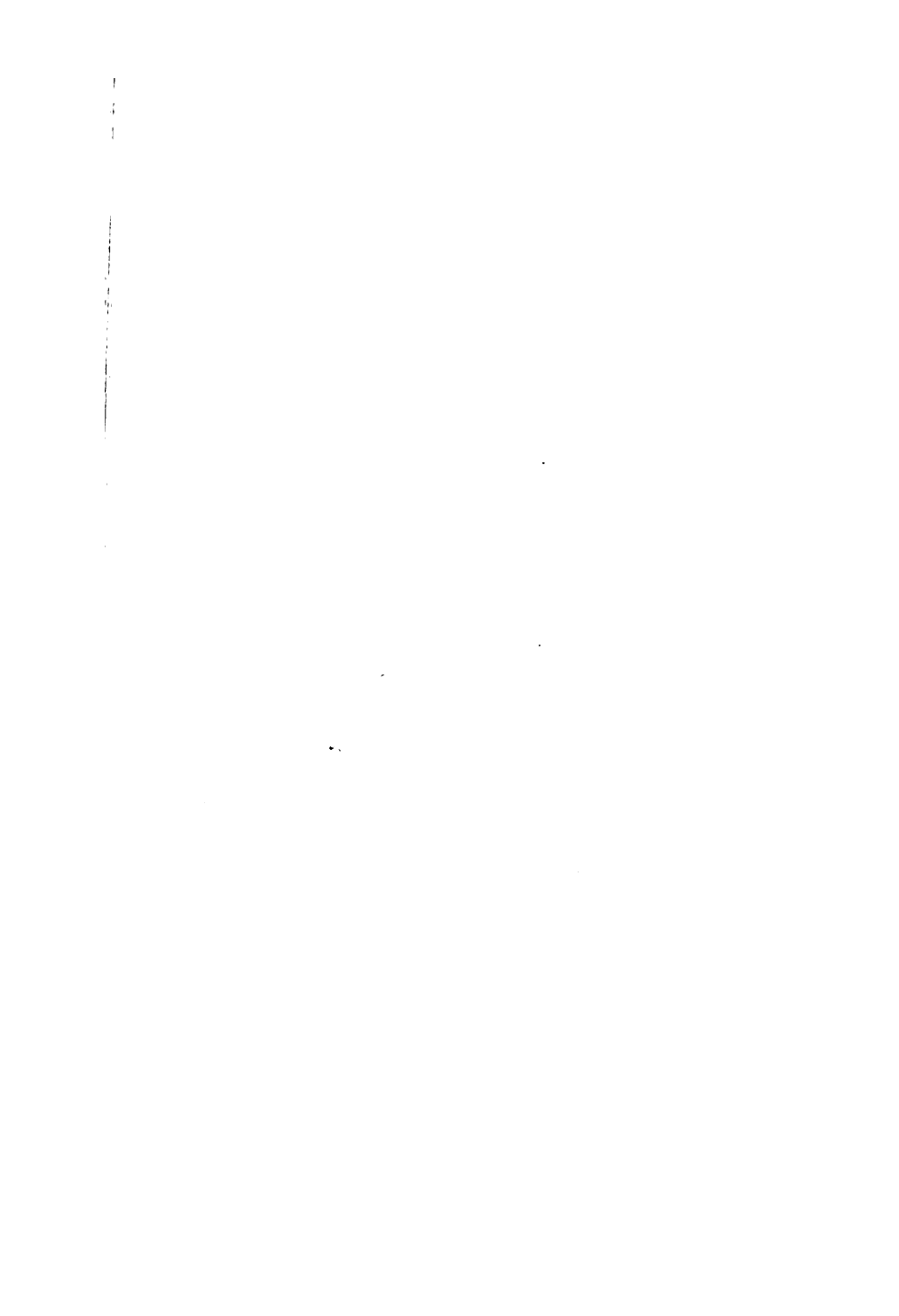
Inside, Bridge was over. Some had gone bedwards, and the remnant lingered over their whiskey and sodas.

Jimmy, the host, was standing, his back to the empty fireplace, proposing a toast, tumbler in hand.

"To many merry meetings in the little village," he was saying. "Mrs. Will, success to every afternoon at Hurlingham. Mrs. Renton, a speedy reclamation of Paul from his bad ways, etc., etc." The genial Jimmy beamed round on them all and joined in the general laugh. "And there's our little Moonie—what's her toast?" He paused for inspiration.



"SEIZING THE PADDLE, HE SENT THE PUNT FLYING OVER THE WATER."



“A happy wedding, of course, silly old Dad.”

The remark was so unlike the usual modern Muriel, that every one thought it was a joke, and laughed. Only Peter felt suddenly as though an iron chain had fallen clanking about him, hemming him in, stifling him. Dodging the general chaff, he escaped, never meeting Muriel's eyes again. Also Mrs. Wilmoughby-Lang, human again, and of quick intuitions, noticed the unusual flush of the girl's face, her almost dishevelled hair, the new look in her usually sharp eyes. And the good lady, remembering the events of the afternoon, pieced two and two together, and came to a conclusion nearer the truth than did Muriel, half an hour later, kneeling wide-eyed and shaken before her open window, staring and staring out towards the lake.

Peter, in the thick atmosphere of the smoking-room, in the depths of a huge arm-chair, soothed himself with his favourite pipe, back into the normal cynical Peter, in whom his true self found a refuge from the world.

And gradually the strange mood, born of the night-softness and the flower-scents, passed from him, and with it the wild unrestful feeling. Before he went to bed, the familiar talk of the men, the familiar pipe, the familiar comfort of it all, had lulled him back into himself, save for an indescribable longing for the rush and business of London life that was to come the next day.

Also that evening, Nina Maynard, in the cool comfortable drawing-room of the White House, found her thoughts so wandering from the book she was reading that she came over to the Colonel's Patience board, and developed a sudden interest in the arrival of black nines on red tens, and found a positive delight in the pouncing on a run of sequences, and the Colonel, wisely saying nothing, congratulated himself on the fact of Nina's absurd indifference to Patience being at last overcome. He resolved to teach her a new one every night. . . .

CHAPTER V

LONDON IN JUNE

LOVE the country as much as you may, there is still a magic in London in June. In spite of the usual lugubriousness of our streets, and the drab dowdiness of our Londoners, there is an undercurrent of gaiety among the bustle, and an occasional carriage or motor giving you here and there a sense that now, if ever, there are folk with their best clothes on, bent on distraction—even enjoyment—eager to please and be pleased. And the presence and mood of these few, gay folk acts in an extraordinary way on all the rest of the drab crowd. The traffic increases enormously, huge blocks grow here and there, making one realise what an unbelievable amount of people there are in town; the

pavements and shops are crowded to distraction; every one, except the incorrigible loafer, has more work than he knows what to do with. Life hums. Above all, in the houses of the rich, flowers hang from every window, a wonderful brave splash of colour in the dim, dingy streets. Most of these houses, too, are still shining from the spring coat of paint, and all wear that gay, lived-in air, so different from the other months of the year.

In the parks, the flowers in their wonderful, harmonious settings blaze out at you, defiant of smoke and grime and dirt. The trees in early full leaf are only half grey with the smoke in the atmosphere, and very pleasant things, especially the dear plane-trees, without which London would not be herself.

They are wonderful gardeners, those men who make the park beds, for here in the heart of London you will see grouped masses of flowers whose colour and form and scent one may rave over. Somehow they have con-

trived to make friends with the smoke and petrol-dust, and nothing clashes, nor is anything thrown into too great a contrast. These beds of fragrant flowers harmonise with the London streets and mingle with the roar of the traffic. They are not things alien, in spite of their ethereal beauty.

Truly there is charm in London in June.

Every year Nina came to town for a week in June, visiting an aged great-aunt who lived in Lexham Gardens, South Kensington, not an inspiring neighbourhood. Nor was her aunt in the least interesting, being over ninety, and stone deaf, but for a grim trumpet, which almost defeated conversation; but she was the best of hostesses, for, poor lady, she had been bedridden for the last twenty years, and therefore left her guest to her own devices. More than a week Nina could never spare from her beloved garden, but that week in town she never missed, for the old lady liked to see her gentle-faced niece about her for a little; more than that, disjointed the elderly tyrannical household.

It was soon after the Netherwood garden-party and the events thereafter described that the week's visit was due, and Nina planted her last seeds for the autumn flowering, superintended the final bedding out, cut down the last of the tied-up crocus leaves, and came up to Lexham Gardens.

In the old days she had hated this yearly visit with a deadly bored hatred, finding, like so many country cousins, nothing whatever to do after the first two days in the great city. She used to sit there, in the dreadful mid-Victorian drawing-room, and fret for her beloved garden and the friendly flowers. The faces of the people passing in the streets had almost frightened her, so strange they were, so wrapped up in themselves, so silent.

Then the book of life had opened before her, and she began to read. Thenceforth London was never dull for her. Even in those hours which had to be spent in her great-aunt's room, working and hearing her rambling on—the old lady was too deaf to be read to—were full of interest, for she

would watch the back of the Cromwell Road houses, and see the folk pass about the rooms, and wonder about them, growing intimate from afar with them all. Best of all, she discovered the true joys of Kensington Gardens and the other open spaces in London town, of which no pen may write so that men may understand. But there is a wonderful joy therein—perhaps it is the joy of a million souls who have found freedom there, not knowing that it existed this side of Eldorado.

Every day she would contrive to walk through the gardens, till she knew and loved them as well as most Londoners, and the monotony of her visit was a thing of the past.

This year also she went to see Mrs. Willoughby-Lang. This lady had a flat near the Hyde Park Hotel, overlooking the Park, and from her balcony window could see all those who passed by, a source of perpetual interest to her, and many a gossip emanated from Mrs. Willoughby's window.

Only on Sundays was she ever to be found there, for every other day she was at Hurl-

ingham or Ranelagh, in the grip of her fiend, absorbed and concentrated. But on Sundays tea in Mrs. Willoughby-Lang's balcony became a feature of her set.

Nina went there, and brought with her the cool collected atmosphere of her garden, which never left her. With whatever set she was thrown she always was the same, for she was always herself—placid, self-contained, and therefore always a part of her surroundings; yet at Mrs. Willoughby's gathering she sat rather silent, rather solitary, for the people collected there spoke perpetually of things and people and places of which she knew nothing; but her silence was not the silence of *gaucherie*, but rather of wisdom, seeing that it is the hall-mark of stupidity to join in conversation which is not of your world. It was Peter Marchant, who, dropping in there to pay his respects to his godmother, was most unfeignedly glad to talk to her.

"I had no idea you were coming up to town," he said, crossing over at once to her, and taking a chair at her side.

She was glad to see him too—very glad—and amused to notice how much he was of these London folk, for all his simplicity in the garden, dressed the same, talked the same—the centre in a way of his set, entirely conventional, but for that whimsical smile of his which, coming so seldom, made you forget he was laughing at you all, till it came.

Yet he was not the same, quite.

He was not only capable of talking, but actually did talk other things than the perpetual discussion of other people, and his own sport. (Why is it that in almost every English drawing-room every topic of real interest but these two is barred, or, if discussed, approached with discomfort and caution?)

Nina found herself able to talk to him at once, for the petty gossip going on round her only puzzled her, and she could not feel much interest therein.

She told him of her duty visit, and amused him by her account of how impossible she had once found it to find anything to do in

London, and then of her "discovery" of the Gardens.

"I'm with you there," he said. "I love the Gardens. It's the only place in town where you find primitive man let loose."

"That sounds alarming."

"Oh, I mean the children—to walk up the Baby's Mile is an education in anthropology."

"I think I like the sparrows in the tea-place best."

"I wish I had the courage to have tea there—I know I should enjoy it. I would also love to take a boat on the Serpentine and explore all those reeds and little places one sees from the shore."

"It must be so sad not to be able to do the things one really wants to."

"It may be half the fun of them. . . . In your garden, don't you dream of wonderful blendings of colour and scent—groups of tall white lilies growing out of masses of Parma violets—things like that, which can't ever happen?"

"Yes . . . how did you know about the

tall lilies and the violets? It has always been one of my dreams."

"Of course . . . it was bound to be—so after all you can't do everything you want to either."

"I was thinking of those things which are stopped by social conventions . . . fashions . . . prejudice . . . whatever you call them . . ."

"In your garden . . . such things don't touch you. . . ."

"In my garden . . . I don't understand them."

"It must be fine to be free as you are."

"Most people do not think of it as 'freedom' to be shut by four hedges into two and a half acres of ground."

"Yet it is freedom," he said quickly, "and I envy you from the bottom of my heart." His voice was suddenly serious, and she knew thereby that he was genuine, for the moment at least, and looked at him with quick sympathy.

"When you want a rest-cure from your

strenuous idleness, go and do a hard day's work in the garden," she said, smiling.

"In your garden?" Perhaps his voice was a little eager—anyway she withdrew suddenly into herself.

"Oh, you will find gardens nearer than mine," she said lightly.

"But none so human," he answered, with his whimsical smile.

She looked at him with frank interest.

"I like that expression," she said.

Suddenly Mrs. Willoughby-Lang descended upon them from the other side of the tea-table. There was a lull in her guests, and the room was almost empty.

"Oh, Miss Maynard, I hope you've had some tea. Has some one been looking after you? That's right. Peter, did you see that man over there . . . the one who stood by the fireplace? That's Copplestone. I was so glad he came . . . so very good of him."

"Who is he, Mrs. Will?"

"Oh, don't you know? I ought to have introduced you . . ."

"Let me see—is he a North Pole explorer . . . or the latest thing in aviators?" put in Peter, with deep interest.

"Good gracious, no; . . . he's a very great man. Why, he was runner up for the All-comers Cup one year . . ."

"Oh, a Croquet-player? I *am* sorry to have missed him." Peter's voice was gently regretful, not a hint of sarcasm in it; yet Mrs. Willoughby looked at him with doubt.

Nina laughed a little and got up to go.

"I've paid you a long visit," she said, "but I've enjoyed it so much."

"My dear, I've seen nothing of you—you must come and dine—what, going down so soon? Oh, that's too bad. Well, I'm coming down to stay with you one day, if that dear father of yours will let me play on that beautiful lawn you have," and with a smile and a handshake, Mrs. Willoughby-Lang darted across to some one else.

Nina turned to say good-bye to Peter, but he was already at the door.

"I'm going to escort you home," he said

with one of his sudden impulses. "You say you are a country cousin, so it can't be safe to let you cross the roads alone."

"But I'm going back by the Park," she protested, smiling.

"You've no idea how difficult it is to get out of the way of the horses sometimes," he answered seriously; "besides I've had no fresh air to-day, so do let me come."

Suddenly she felt glad he wanted to come.

"Very well—I shall love it," she said as he touched the lift bell.

Out of the restraint of Mrs. Willoughby-Lang's flat—out of the atmosphere of small talk and tittle-tattle, they spoke more freely, more intimately. The good comradeship, begun so easily in the Netherwood gardens, thrived under the isolation of the crowded park. There is no solitude quite so complete as to be in, and not of, a crowd; and there is no more intimate footing than to be two alone therein. That walk through the gardens was a thing to be remembered.

Peter found the woman refreshing—it might

have been merely one of his whims—but the cult of the open air and garden life had a strong appeal for him. He was sick of the London season, having in truth found his fiancé exacting in her requirements of his attendance at all balls and dances. He had hitherto enjoyed dawdling through the season, going here and there as he felt inclined, amusing himself in his own way; but he found that the solemn duty and business Muriel and her mother made of being everywhere that any one else was, like a flock of sheep, and expecting him to be with them, was trying.

“After we are married,” he thought unwisely, “I don’t suppose she’ll want to . . . anyway I need n’t go too.” It was n’t as if they really enjoyed things either.

Therefore Nina’s simplicity and thoughtfulness, and her absolute frankness, came to him gratefully. Her atmosphere of fresh air made him think of big open spaces and wide views. There was no one like her in his set—they were all so much of a pattern till you spent your life probing deeper.

He enjoyed that walk, and Kensington Gardens took on a new, quaint garment, seen through her eyes.

They came up the Baby's Mile, with its lovely grouping of herbaceous plants, and the sweetest flowers of all in their Sunday best—not quite so happy as on week-days, because of that perpetual injunction from the denizens of the seats “not to make yourself in a mess.” It is a very pleasant and instructive place that Baby's Mile in the Gardens.

So they came out into the Broad Walk, and so to the street, and down the turning that leads to Marloes Road, and still Peter came with her, every engagement thrown to the winds. But then he was always erratic, which is one of the most useful reputations to acquire.

At the corner of Lexham Gardens, Nina turned to him, smiling firmly.

“Now I am quite safe over all the crossings,” she said, “and you must really go back to your strenuous duties.”

“I suppose I must take my dismissal with

good grace," he answered. "I've enjoyed my half-hour off immensely."

"So have I—and now I have got to plunge into a detailed description of all I have done, shouted into an ear-trumpet."

"And I've got to make my peace with Muriel."

Somehow, that jarred.

"Good-bye," she said, rather quickly.

He raised his hat and was gone.

She fitted her key thoughtfully into the lock and entered the house. Her mind was full of the man who had just left her, and of the many things they had talked about—a keen mind, fertile soil for casual thoughts dropped therein like seeds. She had met very few men like Peter; they were not of her quiet country world, and his abrupt entry into her kingdom found an eager welcome from her. She was, as I say, full of it all, as she took off her hat and tidied her hair. Yet when she entered her aunt's room, and smiling took up the trumpet, she found little enough to say.

"Yes, I went to my friend's flat."

"Yes, thank you, aunt, I have had tea."

"Her name is Lang—Mrs. Willoughby-Lang—a friend of Daddy's in India."

"No, a widow—twice married."

"No, no family at all, I believe."

Then a pause. How a trumpet does defeat one's powers of conversation.

"I came back across the Park."

"Oh, yes, beautifully fine."

"Yes, lots of people about."

"It took about half-an-hour."

So that was her description of her afternoon. She felt she could not shout about Peter into that dreadful trumpet, suddenly realising that he would require a lot of explaining to a nonagenarian.

Presently the old lady grew tired, for she was failing fast, and she began to fall asleep. Nina gently took the trumpet away, and left the room. After all, her duties were not heavy for the amount of pleasure she had.

Ah—she never remembered having found much pleasure in her London visit before.

She was down in the drawing-room now—a dreadful mid-Victorian drawing-room, full of stuffy furniture, crewel-work, and “knick-knacks”—and the walls were yellow.

What was the difference then? Her mind went persistently back over her visit. Peter Marchant, of course, made the difference. She realised now that when she had gone to Mrs. Willoughby-Lang’s she had hoped that he would be there.

He interested her, of course. She was glad too that he had been without Muriel.

She put aside her book, restlessly, and went to the window. The Lexham Gardens drawing-room look out on to the street, and there is not much inspiration to be gained therefrom.

Have you ever looked out of the drawing-room windows of Lexham Gardens?

If not, go and do it after you have been wrapped up in your afternoon, and you will touch the bottom depths of reaction.

Nina drummed her fingers against the glass. Suddenly she longed for her garden and its

flowers, and the touch of the sweet brown earth through her fingers. She felt the prison-walls of habit and convention closed round her.

“In your garden—such things don’t touch you.”

She took up her book again but the vision of her garden came before the page . . . and she was not alone therein.

CHAPTER VI

NINA REALISES

IT was a month later, about the second week in July. The ramblers on the pergola were a mad riot of colour. Each kind blazed forth in a wild effort to express itself—the joyful rampant tomboy Dorothy Perkins, in her bright soft pink, her cousin, the paler, more ethereal Lady Gay, the delicate, Devonshire-creamy Philadelphia, and the old original Crimson Rambler, mother of them all; these and many others clambered and blossomed over the rustic wood, falling into festoons here, twining round a pole there, ablaze everywhere, a rhapsody of colour. The rose-garden too was full of them, and of other flaunting voluptuous blooms—old-fashioned ones, Caroline Testout, Maman Cochet, Vic-

tor Hugo, old Papa Gentier, her ladyship the Vicountess Folkestone, Madame Abel Chateney—all names to conjure with, and all gathered together in democratic confusion, clamouring for a hearing of their several beauties.

The Colonel potted about among them, scissors in hand, snipping a fallen one here and there, examining the buds for aphis, as he might have looked for missing buttons on parade.

Suddenly he pounced.

“Tch, tch, Caroline,” he muttered, “what d’ye mean by it, miss? What d’ye mean by it?” And he stumped down the garden indignantly to fetch some strange concoction and a tiny syringe.

On his way back he met Nina coming up, basket and tools in hand, the blue apron as usual, but these days the sun-bonnet was replaced by a large straw hat.

“What’s the matter, Daddy?” she asked, “you look so worried.”

“So I am. Little beast of a green fellow

has got into that bud on the best Caroline Testout . . . eaten her half up . . . can't keep pace with them."

The Colonel thought he was very annoyed, but Nina knew that he was really delighted. Fighting green-fly on his roses was the chief joy of his life. His roses were children to him, sons to take the place of those he had never had, and he revelled in bringing them up year after year, moulding them into shape, giving them the best chance to grow and produce perfect specimens after their own kind. All the country round knew him as a rose-grower; at local shows he always carried away the first prize, even with the head gardener at Netherwood Hall against him. Each flower-show was to him a Waterloo.

Nina sympathised properly, as she was expected to do, and the Colonel thumped on down the path, muttering, "Caroline of all people, tch, tch."

The woman went on slowly up the garden. It was very hot, and the afternoon sun blazed

down on her little corner. She would like to have gone for a stroll in the cool woods, and looked half hesitating at the little green gate. But there was work to be done—the Colonel and she ran the garden between them, with only the groom-gardener to help—and she could not bear the dear flowers to be uncomfortable, as she put it, because of her shirking the work.

So placidly she pulled on her gloves, and began her task.

Her thoughts were never idle as she worked. Sometimes a half-smile would come as she thought of the Colonel and his childlike adoration of his roses. Then a slight frown as some domestic worry flitted through her mind, but this never troubled her for long, for she never allowed the peace of the garden to be disturbed by the minor worries that make up half the trouble in the world. Frequently, though, the little frown came when she thought of those people who had made such a sudden impetuous intrusion into her quiet world. Try as she would she could

never reconcile the thought of Peter Marchant and Muriel Brackenridge together. Long days, years rather, in her garden and the solitude thereof had made her wise with a wisdom beyond that of the woman of the world. From her understanding and love of flowers had come a quick intuitive perception and sympathy. She had met Peter Marchant only three or four times. Muriel she had watched grow up, though from a distance, yet she seemed to see into their minds with the clearness of a sybil of old. And what she saw distressed her.

Then she would dismiss the thought impatiently. "It is no business of mine, after all. No one is forcing them to marry. He must love her to have asked her, and one day, when she is older, she will come to love him as he should be loved." Then she would realise that her thoughts were intruding too intimately on other people's affairs, and she would return to her weeding with determined hands.

So she worked on through the afternoon,

till the maid brought tea into the rose-garden by the old stone seat.

Colonel Maynard never took tea, on principle. "Simply don't care for it," he would say, "pernicious stuff. What you women—etc. etc." All the same the second cup was always brought, and Nina always poured it out for him.

This afternoon he was absorbed in syringe and quassia-chips.

"What's that, my dear, tea? No, thanks. I always tell you I never touch it. Oh, well, as you've poured it out for me, I suppose I must." And with a sigh he laid down his tools and came over to the tea-table. This was a comedy repeated daily.

"Just a piece of bread-and-butter, then. Don't really want it." The Colonel sat down and stretched out his legs. "Jove, it's a warm day. We want rain." Then, as usual, the plate of home-made cakes found itself near him. "Well, well, I'll just try one of cook's to see what it's like." And soon, as usual, the plate stood empty, the Colonel's

cup was replenished, and he presently went back to work perfectly convinced that he had had no tea, never did have any, and never wanted it. All this happened, as I say, every day.

Nina lingered longer than usual over her tea. It was one of those heavenly grilling days that only England can produce, and she so seldom does. The midges droned, and the bees hummed about the roses, and a faint waft of hay from a field near mingled with the hot scent of the flowers—a day for love and youth and happiness.

“By the way, I hear that young fellow who came here—what’s his name—Marchant?—is down at Netherwood again. Been ill, or something.”

To Nina’s intense surprise, she felt her heart suddenly and slowly begin to thump and the blood mount into her face. . . . What was happening to her?

Then she said casually, “Really? Are the rest of them back so soon?”

“No, he seems to be there alone, somehow.

I've forgotten what they said—'Flu,' or something. If he's well enough, I thought we might ask him over here. It would only be civil."

"Yes, we might," she assented vaguely. "What about that rambler over there, Daddy? Does n't it want tying up?"

"God bless me, yes, so it does."

They went over to the wildly shooting rambler, and agreed as to the bounds set for it. Then Nina had to get the steps and the bass, and hold them while the Colonel, with deft but very slow fingers, tied it into place. She thought he would never finish. Then he discovered more delinquents, and they moved slowly about the garden tying up one and the other. Nearly an hour it took, and all the time Nina was holding herself under discipline as severe as a monastic law.

For she was longing to get away into her own garden, to learn why her heart had thumped so suddenly when she had heard that Peter Marchant was at Netherwood.

At last the Colonel returned to his syringe

and quassia-chips, and Nina was free to fly. It was characteristic of her that even then she did not hurry away, but sauntered slowly up the pergola-path, snipping a withered blossom here and there, and reaching the garden took up the weeding where she had left off.

Then at last thought came to her—not coherent but fairly clear. She knew that Peter Marchant was the man she could have loved, the man for whom she had been waiting, for whom, though unseen, she had refused Jack Stodart, the Admiral's son, and the Reverend Hugh Martin, Vicar of Littleham.

To her, marriage without love was non-existent; marriage with love the ultimate aim and object of every woman's life.

And Peter Marchant was engaged to Muriel Brackenridge.

Nina knelt there, weeding; moving from patch to patch mechanically as each became finished under the tireless hands. All the bitterness—if ever there was any—vanished under the kindness of the flowers and the summer evening. As the shadows length-

ened slowly out across the garden, her thoughts straightened themselves out also, and merged into true perspective.

The uppermost idea in her mind became a sense of the foolishness of it all; and the greatest comfort of it was that she had met him only three or four times, need never meet him again—and the memory of a man you have only met thus, and who cares nothing for you, cannot remain very poignantly with you.

Only she knew she would never love again, and she was twenty-eight.

Suddenly the little green gate clicked, and looking up she saw Peter Marchant standing there.

To her own surprise, after the absurd thing that had happened, when the Colonel had mentioned the man's name at tea, her heart remained quite calm. She came forward, cool and friendly. (That also is a woman's way.)

He spoke first, smiling whimsically.

"This time it is really unintentional," he said. "If I had meant to call to-day I

should have come along the road and rung the front-door bell."

"Have you lost your way again?" she asked, shaking hands.

"Entirely." For a second his voice sounded serious, but he smiled the impression away.

"Then I suggest at least that you come in and rest, because you look tired, and I hear you have been ill."

"Flu," he answered, closing the gate behind him carefully, "I've been rotten."

She led the way to a green bank, part of the wood itself, but enclosed and left in its wild state, to be covered by daffodils and scyllas in the spring.

For a moment silence fell between them.

"Are you always here—always working—and always alone?" he asked.

"Always alone up here. This is my sanctuary."

"And I have blundered into it, without even knocking at the door. . . . I'm sorry. . . ."

The Little Green Gate

"You could n't have knocked at the little green gate. There's nothing to knock."

"Quite true. And if I had, you might not have let me in."

"No, I should not have let you in if you had knocked. I should have sent you round to the front door, like a Christian."

"Shall I go now?"

"If you want to hear the exact treatment given to a certain Miss Caroline Testout when she deliberately encourages green-fly."

"I'm afraid I'm not strong enough," said the man plaintively. "I've been very ill."

"Then you may sit here and rest while I go on weeding."

"Is that what you were doing?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I could do it too?"

"I think you look much too tired to do anything but sit on that bank as I tell you. How did you get it?"

"Flu? Oh, I don't know. These beastly dances and things Muriel took me to. Every night for three weeks up to three and four

in the morning. And I had to be at my office by ten as well. Can't think how she does it herself. Then I got a chill and went down, and there I was."

"And you are recruiting here?"

"Yes. It was jolly good of them, was n't it? I do detest hotels and seaside places and all that, and one can't stay with friends when one is feeling rotten. Mrs. Jimmy has promised to bring Muriel down for the week-end, if she can get away."

"Don't you like the dances and things, then?"

"Oh, a bit, but not every night. Before I was engaged I used to go when I liked, and chuck it when I was bored. It was all right then, but I can't see the use of turning enjoyment into a duty."

"I think it is the silliest thing in the world," said Nina quietly.

"Yes, I knew you would. Somehow, to see you up here always with your flowers, always working—always, I think, happy—makes one realise what a lot of unnecessary

tomfoolery there is in the world. It is restful to remember you here."

Nina's hand shook suddenly, and she gripped the fork and dug it violently into the ground, erradicating an enormous dandelion root.

"I think that the roots of dandelions must be in Australia," she remarked irrelevantly.

The sunset was one great golden blaze over the west, a few flat purple clouds scattered across it, and the old mellow moss-green roof of the house below them lit up with a wonderful glow, a thing for an artist to rave about. From the old chimney a thin curl of blue smoke went straight and unswerving into the air, mingling with the atmosphere, making for a marvellous sense of peace.

Peter watched it with half-closed eyes, and Nina, looking up suddenly, saw how thin and drawn his face had become. Was it only influenza, she wondered?

Suddenly the man got up.

"I must go," he said. "Williams will look at me with pained surprise if I am late

for dinner. I can't bear to give Williams pain."

"Will you go through the garden and along the road, or by the woods?"

"Oh, the woods. I couldn't stand the road to-night. I know my way now by the woods, and I shall just have time," he answered, looking at his watch.

She came with him to the green gate.

He hesitated, hand on latch, then turned impulsively towards her.

"I'm going to ask you something—it may seem queer to you, and yet it won't, because you'll understand."

"What is it?" she asked, smiling, her voice, in spite of herself, quickened to sympathy.

"Just this. I want to come and do a whole day's work in your garden. I believe this"—he indicated the garden and her tools—"is the best tonic for body and soul. And I want something of the sort. . . ."

For a second she paused.

"You can't—garden—at Netherwood?" she hesitated.

Peter's laugh was cynical.

"I don't suppose they want Jones, the head gardener, to give notice just now. He certainly would decline to stay where stray lunatics were allowed. No, I haven't the courage—no one has ever done a stroke of work there except the under-gardeners. That's why it is so different to this. Your garden is so—so human . . . as I told you before," he added quaintly.

Nina hesitated no longer. No one knew better than she did the value of a good day's work in the garden. The man needed it, . . . she must forget herself and help him.

"Of course you may come, then," she said smiling.

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, as early as you like."

"Thank you," he said simply.

Peter Marchant strode away through the woods with the music of Nina's slow voice in his ears, and the scent of the evening garden steeping his senses.

And it was not till ten minutes after, hav-

ing collected her tools and tidied up, that Nina remembered that to-morrow was the one day that the Colonel was going to attend a distant flower-show, and he would be away all day.

Also, on the strength of it, she had promised the maids a whole holiday to visit their home at an outlying farm. Even the groom-gardener would be away, driving the Colonel. There would be no one at home but her old nurse. . . .

For a moment panic seized her. She half thought of flying through the woods to tell him not to come. Then of a letter, but the postman had called for letters an hour ago.

Then the Colonel called her to see his eventual triumph over the green-fly in his beloved Caroline.

Finally, she did nothing.

CHAPTER VII

A DAY'S WORK

EARLY morning in a garden is one of the most wonderful things in God's earth. It is utterly magic, mystic, indefinable. The freshness of Eden is over everything; the flowers, newly-opened, are wet with dew, the colours more shadowy, the scents more secret. To work in a garden in the early morning is to dig right down into the heart of life, and to learn more things than many men learn in a lifetime; it is getting back nearer to the beginning of all the worlds, nearer the primal order of all things. Night in the garden may bring you wild, sweet thoughts, may stir your passions, give you divine unrest, but work there in the morning and you will learn peace and wisdom. If every man would

cultivate his patch of earth every morning before beginning his day's work, there would be less trouble in the world, fewer tangles, fewer failures. The good smell of the earth is a fine thing to a man with a problem to face; it clears his head, and acts as a tonic on body and soul. It gives back joyousness and simplicity, both good things, and good weapons wherewith to flatten out some of the evils in the world.

"I say, is this a weed?"

"Yes."

"And this? It looks awfully like a plant."

"It's a dreadful weed—pull it right up from the root."

Peter, on his knees, in his shirt-sleeves, a pucker between the eyebrows, the odd mocking smile for once off his lips, would have been unrecognisable to most of his friends.

He dug the fork viciously into the ground in reply, turning the clods and ruthlessly ejecting the offending root. Nina, at work on another border, glanced at him now and then, half amused, wholly sympathetic. They

spoke rarely, and only about the garden, but between them ran a continual current of sympathy, born perhaps of the good earth. Rather to her surprise she soon discovered that Peter was a born gardener, thorough and tireless in whatever job she set him to do. He was now at work on a waste patch of ground, freeing it of weeds and stones, preparing it for next year's wallflower seeds, to be sown that day. It is a fine thing to set about the regeneration of a patch of earth; repaying too, as the smooth soft soil grows under your hand.

An immense peace settled on Peter. This was really a good day in his life. There was no pretence of enjoyment about this, no secret, deadly boredom, such as had been dragging at him for the last three weeks. Up here in the garden he looked neither ahead nor backwards; just let him get this waste patch cultivated first, was his one thought.

Nina understood that there was something wrong that accounted for this feverish energy, and being a woman made wise by years of

garden solitude, she asked no questions, hinted no sympathy, but gave him more and more work to do.

At half-past twelve she put down her fork.

"I'm going to leave you for a bit to work by yourself. I'm going to see about lunch. When I come back I expect you to have finished that piece."

"Finished? Oh, Lord." Peter dug away at the clumps of Pimpernel. "I say, I forgot about lunch. Hadn't I better . . .?" But Nina had vanished down the pergola. For a second Peter watched where she had gone.

"Curious thing," he thought, "I have met her only four times, yet I feel just as much at home here as if I had known her all my life. She's so natural . . . or something." Then he fell to work hard lest the demon of thought should get the upper hand.

In half-an-hour Nina came back slowly up the path carrying two neat baskets in her hands.

"Finished?" she asked, smiling.

"Not quite. Awfully sorry, but it's a stiff piece of ground."

"Never mind. You may leave off now, and we'll have lunch."

"I say, what will Colonel Maynard say about my being here? Will he think it awful cheek? You know I never thought about lunch, and . . . and that, I was so intent on getting my cure."

"Dad is away at the Horsham flower-show for the whole day. He went before you came. Also my two maids have gone for a holiday to-day, so . . ."

"My word, and you never told me . . . how awfully good of you. But I say, I'll go back to Netherwood for lunch and come again. Why ever did n't you tell me what a nuisance I'd be?"

She laughed. "Truthfully, I never remembered till after you had gone last night. Anyhow it was n't worth . . . My solution was this. . . ." She pointed to the two neat baskets.

"A picnic? How splendid of you to think

of it . . . Of course we'll take it up to the woods." He was quite boyish in his enjoyment.

"I had n't thought of the woods, but we might as well"; she glanced up to the cool, inviting green of the trees. "Only . . ."

She hesitated, suddenly shy.

"You are thinking of Muriel," he said with amused directness.

She looked at him with comical distress.

He considered a moment.

"Look here," he said boyishly, "last night Muriel was at the Salcome's dance . . . only kindly Providence prevented me being there too . . . but she probably danced all night . . . allowed a dozen or so young men to put their arms round her waist and whirl her intimately about the room; after which she went away alone with each one, probably wandering through the gardens, under the stars, or sitting in some dim corner of the staircase. If she can do that, being engaged to me, with absolute propriety, why should n't you and I, in broad daylight, and in public woods,

eat our lunch together, and enjoy it too? Bosh! . . . come along . . . I'm hungry, for the first time in three weeks."

Nina said no more.

"That's good . . . no, I'll carry the baskets . . . through here, of course?"

He opened the little green gate, and held it for her. For a second she paused, and their eyes met, hers doubtful, questioning—his compelling, curious. Then she passed through, and they went together up the wood path.

Once through the little green gate restraint and doubt vanished. They were comrades, chatting and laughing, the world forgotten. The trees were in full leaf, wonderful, and just holding the light breeze in their top branches. Underneath, the light was amber and dim, a veil for things unseen.

"We must not go too far. I only allow an hour off for lunch."

"Oh, let it be a British workman's hour. I'm still an invalid, and I deserve it anyway, you know."

“What about this?” They had come suddenly to a little open space where the ground fell away below them, and they could see over the tops of the lower trees to open country, and beyond that the shining strip of sea. Round about them a few beeches, very high, stretched shivering towards the blue dome.

“This is predestined for us,” said Peter solemnly. “What have you got for lunch?”

“Cold pie, lettuce, sandwiches, home-made cake, and strawberries. Will it do?”

“It’s a lunch for gods. You are a wonderful woman.”

Peter was enjoying himself with a zest he had not felt for months. They ate their lunch like children, sharing alike. It was found that Nina had forgotten forks, so they attacked the pie with their fingers, and they quarrelled over the largest strawberries. They talked now all the time intimately and easily, mainly of books, where they met on mutual ground, and found their tastes diametrically opposed, whereupon each tried to

convert the other and grew hot over the argument. Peter found Nina slow in her ideas, but thoughtful, intelligent. She loved his quick, keen brain, the ease with which he disposed of arguments, brought up his own points, and turned the world upside down between one strawberry and another. It was a treat to her, wonderful, unlooked-for in her monotonous, solitary life, to come up against a mind so alive, so clear, so human. She realised also, with that quick intuition of hers, that it was not often that he talked so well or so much as he did to her—that the rôle assigned to him by his set was rather that of the cynical, quiet, amusing fellow, “brainy,” but not obtrusively so. She felt also, intuitively, that it was a relief to him to get out of his pose, out of his environment, and to tread with firm, comfortable feet the ground of ordinary human naturalness. She knew too—with a pride that made her eyes sparkle and her face, usually too placid, light up vivaciously, and the words come to her quickly and easily—that it was she who had drawn



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the man out of himself, that it was her presence, her influence, her being that swayed him.

“So long as he does n’t know it is, what does it matter?” was her thought. “He will never know.” So she enjoyed her hour, her secret triumph.

Peter lay flat on his back, staring up into the beech-trees above him. Nina, leaning against the tree-trunk, looked away over the country and to the sea beyond. And suddenly silence fell on them. Each was buried in unseen thought.

To the man had come, desperately near and real, the recollection of Muriel; Muriel with her mindless, soulless gaiety, her butterfly life, meaningless, purposeless; the untiring pursuit—not of enjoyment (which is a fine quest, and worthy of all men and women), but of some foolish, pitiful counterfeit of it, some guy figure, set up by a crowd of irresponsible people, and so worshipped by them as to have become a god, all-powerful, grinding, pitiless, drawing unto himself the

souls of men and women, content with nothing less. It was in the worship of this Guy-Fawkes-God that Peter knew his life with Muriel would be spent. Then he turned and looked at the woman by his side.

"Why has n't Muriel got some of her human sanity?" was the thought that sprang into his brain. Fatal. Once the beloved has been compared even for a second with another woman unfavourably, her sway is over, her charm lost.

Peter sat up suddenly.

"Good Lord," he said, "there's magic in these beeches."

"There's magic everywhere."

"Not in a stuffy London ballroom."

Then she knew whither his thoughts had been taking him. Silence fell again, but this time with a difference. Now there was no peace in the woods.

"We must go," said Nina lightly. "Even the British workman could not make his dinner-hour longer than this."

Peter got up.

"You and I . . ." he began, with one of those swift impulses, then stopped.

"Yes?" she questioned calmly, meeting his eyes.

. . . "have both made an excellent lunch," he finished, and the whimsical smile came to his lips. "Now we are going to finish that patch."

"Do you really feel up to more work?"

"It is the only thing I want," he said gravely.

"Don't you think . . ." she spoke diffidently, hesitatingly . . . "perhaps it would be a good thing if . . . if you went *away* and did some real work somewhere . . . in some piece of ground of your own . . . something of that sort? . . . Perhaps the Netherwood solitude is boring you?" She was busy with the baskets as she spoke.

"Yes . . . perhaps—Netherwood—is. You think I ought to go away? . . ."

"Well, you say you can't work at Netherwood . . . and my garden . . . I'm afraid . . ."

"Afraid of what?" he said mercilessly.

"I'm afraid it won't give you much scope," she finished calmly. "Please don't think it impertinent of me . . . to suggest your going away."

"Of course I don't. But I think it very unkind of you."

"Why?"

"Because if I stayed I should ask you to let me come to you every day and learn the job. I know nothing about it, you know. I don't feel competent to go on my own."

Every day. For a moment she tried to see with Muriel's eyes, and she saw clearly. No.

Not for a moment did the thought flit through her brain, that if she willed she could supplant Muriel. She had but to think of the girl's butterfly beauty, and remember how that type always appeals to men. She never thought of her own beauty, beauty not so much of form or face, as of charm, character, spirit . . . the beauty of a woman made wise by her Mother Earth.

Yet, every day.

In a few weeks he would be married, tied to that butterfly's wings, lost to her as companion for ever. And he would never know what that "every day" would mean to her. That they could be good comrades she knew; they were that already. Her detached personality had made it possible.

Then Muriel's point of view came swiftly and suddenly before her again, and that vision of good comradeship was at an end.

"Would it have bored you?" Peter asked softly, seeing her silent. "I'm so sorry."

She became downright . . . an excellent refuge in trouble.

"No, you know it would not have bored me. Only I think it—should—bore you."

He could be downright too, she was surprised to find.

"You mean, in other words, that if Muriel were to hear that coming down to Netherwood for a rest-cure, I spent all my days working hard in the garden of another woman, a comparative stranger to her—not to me—" he added quickly.

"To you, too," she interpolated.

"No. But anyhow, you mean there might be trouble."

"If I were Muriel, there would be trouble."

"If Muriel cares a snap of her fingers about me."

"Mr. Marchant." She was shaken out of her serenity by his vehemence. There was a long silence as they tramped through the woods together.

"I should n't have said that," he said at last. "After all, she has promised to marry me, and that is the most wonderful thing a woman can do for a man."

"No, you should n't have said it . . . but . . . she should n't have let you think it."

"I don't think she knows what love means."

"And . . . you?"

"I have learnt—what it might mean."

"You will teach her," said the woman, very softly.

Peter looked at her quickly.

"You think that?" he said. "Truly?"

"Do you want me to say?"

"Yes."

"Well then, my own belief is, that love is utterly spontaneous. It is there, or it is not there. Neither can make the other love truly; . . . it could only be liking . . . gratitude . . . something commercial."

"Is gratitude commercial?" he asked, surprised by the word.

"Surely. Payment for something given. By being enormously good to a woman, doing all you can, giving her all your life, perhaps . . . unless she is absolutely heartless, she would give you—gratitude. But make her love you for it—oh, no. She would be far more likely to be loving some selfish wretch who would take everything she had from her, giving nothing in return."

"Then . . . if Muriel does not love me now, you mean, she never will?"

"If she does n't . . . but how can you tell? No woman ever shows her true heart to any man—and their ways of loving are different."

"How is it you are so wise, woman of the brown earth and the flowers?"

They had come to the green gate, and were standing by it.

Nina's eyes smiled mysteriously.

"I am not wise, man of the stuffy London ballrooms and the Bridge-tables. I am only telling you the things I think. Up here in the garden one has time to think."

She passed through the gate.

"Now work, then," said Peter, taking off his coat. "I'm going to finish this patch." He set to work, seizing the sieve, and went on intently, almost frantically.

For an hour or two they worked in silence; but Peter was no longer unconscious of Nina's presence. He felt it throbbing through every moment. In sowing the wallflower seed, their hands met accidentally, just the merest touch. There was nothing in it, but at that touch Nina suddenly felt the colour flushing over her face, and her heart thumped as it had when the Colonel had told her of Peter's return. She turned quickly to hide it, and the man never saw, but the light contact had left his own blood tingling and throbbing in

his veins. So they worked till the peace of the garden settled down on their souls, and the long shadows drew slowly over the landscape, and the setting sun burnished the forest into a mass of living gold.

"It is time I went," said Peter.

"Are you better?"

"Yes. But the cure is not complete."

"Are n't you going away to do some real work?"

"Yes. I have thought it out. I am going to a pal of mine who lives in a hulk up a creek, and has a garden on shore. I have often been there for a night. But I must write first and see if he is there, as it is his time for going away. I shan't hear till Saturday, and then I believe Mrs. Jimmy is bringing Muriel down. It must be next week then; may I come and learn from you till then?"

Nina was silent.

"That is only two days more . . . let me come."

Apart from her own will, Nina answered:

"Yes, come. You shall help Dad with his roses to-morrow."

The man held out his hand.

"I don't know what I have n't got to thank you for, woman of the brown earth," he said.

"I've loved to-day, too."

"Will you explain to the Colonel that I'm coming? . . . He won't mind?"

"Of course not; he will enjoy having a companion at his work as much as I've done."

She had grown suddenly formal, but do what she would there was a tremor in her words that was not formal, quite. It sent the blood surging to Peter's head again.

"Good-bye," he said abruptly.

The green gate clicked to, and he was gone. . . . Nina felt suddenly cold and lonely, and unrestful.

She gathered the tools together methodically, as she heard the wheels of the Colonel's trap coming up the drive.

The garden, which had been the Garden of Eden, became again the garden of the White House, the garden of her home.

She went down the steep path, forcing her mind for the reception of details concerning prize-winning roses, stuffiness of tents, and the unfairness and imbecility of all judges.

The light had gone out of the sunset sky.

CHAPTER VIII

“THREE DAYS, THAT CHANGE THE WORLD . . .”

THERE followed one of those moves with which Fate seems to play into the hands of human beings, with an almost fiendish simplicity, creating situations undreamed-of, unprovided-for.

As usual, Fate sent her message by the medium of a little red perspiring telegraph boy, on an equally red bicycle.

He came up the drive that evening, just as the Colonel came down dressed for dinner.

“Bless my soul, what’s this?” muttered the Colonel, fumbling for his glasses. It was half in his mind that those fools of judges had found out a few of their ridiculous mistakes, and awarded him first prize instead of

second for those glorious *Maman Cochetts*, the best blooms he had ever grown.

Instead of which, it announced quite simply that Miss Jane Maynard was dead, and he was sole executor; his presence was required immediately in London. Poor non-agenarian Aunt Jane, it was a fateful moment for you to let go your feeble hold on life.

Five minutes later the little red-faced, red-bicycled messenger had sped down the drive, and the quiet house was in a ferment. The Colonel's London clothes must be had out, aired, brushed, and pressed; the Colonel's boots fetched from the cobbler in the village; the Colonel's portmanteau from the boxroom. Trains must be looked out, a message taken to the stables; and all the time dinner getting cold on the table. It was no simple matter when the Colonel went to London in a hurry. No wonder, perhaps, that the events of the day and the promise of the morrow slipped out of Nina's mind.

At dinner, all the Colonel could talk of was

the affairs of poor old Aunt Jane, and the possible trouble with her solicitors. There was to be a legacy too, he knew . . . and he would be able to afford that new greenhouse he wanted in the kitchen-garden. That reminded him of the flower-show and his *Maman Coquets*, and Nina had to listen sympathetically to minute details of the new exhibits. She loved the flowers as passionately as did the old man himself, but in a different way. To her appealed simple things of colour and form and scent, and her appreciation of a rose was never spoilt by the crumpling of an outside leaf, the work of fly or caterpillar, and the Colonel testily despaired of ever making her a connoisseur, or true rose-grower. Laughingly she would hold her own opinions, and listen sympathetically to his.

To-night she was just the same; a shade more silent, a little more effort in her sympathy—no more. She was one of those rare women who can thrust their own interests deep down into their hearts, an infinite joy to themselves, scarcely known to the outer

world. At last, alone in her room, it surged up, bursting the floodgates.

"To-morrow . . . the next day . . . and the next . . . alone."

The little room, with its ten-year-old débütante furniture, scarcely seemed able to hold her.

It was nothing to her at this time, I think, that Peter could never return her love, or even know of its existence. Such a possibility never crossed her mind. Peter was Muriel's . . . had been long before he had come through the little green gate, and into her life and fate. It was enough for her that she loved . . . at last she loved. The love she had waited for all her life had come and she probed it to the depths, revelling in the giving of it. Like all simple, self-contained natures, she let go utterly in the face of a crisis. She looked her love straight in the face, saw the truth and depth of it, and rejoiced therein rather than felt shame at the cruel caprice of fate, that she should give her love where none could be given again.

Also she rejoiced, for it was given her to do something for her beloved—no woman asks more than that in life. He had come to her . . . to her garden, to her peace. to her solitude . . . to be healed—of what she did not know, and did but dimly guess . . . but for healing and strength he had come to her. She would give and give and give, to the utmost of her ability. What she had learnt from the patient years spent in her garden, she would teach him . . . she knew now why she had learnt it. As she slowly and thoughtfully undressed she planned out all she would give him to do.

Three days. So much was it the burthen of her thoughts, that it startled her when next morning the Colonel, climbing, rather stiffly into the high dog-cart, called it to her cheerfully.

“Three days, my dear; shan’t be a minute longer than three days.”

The cart-wheels echoed it scrunching down the gravel drive—the gate growled it as she swung it to after them—the Dorothy Perkins,

clambering lushly over the pergola, shouted it as she went up the path. Her wild garden sang it to her in chorus, and above the forest trees, swaying together, whispered it lightly in the breeze.

"Three days, that change the world . . ."

Then Peter Marchant came down the path and through the little green gate.

"You are early this morning," she smiled. The whole meaning of the morning garden was in that welcoming smile of hers.

"Williams nearly had a fit when I asked for 8.30 breakfast . . . he was far too perfect to show it, but I felt that fit running all up and down me. It required some courage, I can tell you."

She told him of the Colonel's departure. Curious, he had not realised before how he had disliked the idea of changing his master, in the person of this quiet-voiced woman, for the testy, and to his mind somewhat boring, old Colonel. He professed concern, however.

"I shan't be able to learn about the roses,"

he said seriously. "I did so want to know all about Miss Testout's malady."

"Will you be able to put up with a little of my plain gardening?"

"It's all part of the cure . . . I suppose I must."

"Well, I want my annual clearing of the paths done to-day. All these weeds hoed up and the weed-killer sprinkled on. You start that end and I start this."

They were soon at work, comrades, children playing games.

Perhaps it was a whim of Peter's that made him into an amateur gardener—just such a whim as led him to open the little green gate that first morning. He was full of whims and impulses, that often led him into quaint phases. He always recognised them as whims, and knew, cynically, that they would pass away and leave him much as before, and very little further on life's highway. For the time being, however, he entered heart and soul into his impulse and filled his mind with it. This latest whim, coming as it did as an anti-

dote to some violent, half-formed discontent with his life, generally carried him wildly along with it. It was splendid, this working in the morning in the open air. This is what man was meant for . . . his true destiny. There was no end to his enthusiasm. But through it all he felt strangely, comfortably conscious of the woman's presence. She never left his mind, as at his end of the path he hoed and raked industriously, with that little set, almost derisive, smile, that frightened his godmother so much. He seldom looked at her, seldom spoke, but there it was—she never left his thoughts. Once or twice he realised this, and smiling a little more thinly, deliberately set himself to think of something else. That sort of thing would not do now, he said to himself grimly. So the morning passed, and lunch-hour found them again under the beech-trees in the forest.

Do you know the immense satisfaction there is in two people doing the same thing exactly—something, perhaps, a little unusual—two days running? It so seldom happens that one

can—something is missing nearly always, something wrong. When it does happen, it makes for intimacy as nothing else in the world can . . . it seems to be almost a habit, as if one had never done anything else. It is dangerous, of course; all habits are, one way or another.

As to the danger of this, neither Peter nor Nina recognised it, at least I do not think so. If they did they simply played the game with their eyes open—read the last page of a book as it were, and yet turned back to read the intervening chapters.

Muriel and London and October were forgotten, and the Colonel was forgotten and his nonagenarian aunt. There was much else these two found to say to each other under the calm intimacy of the beeches. It was a wonderful summer that year, day after day rising in misty promise of great heat, the sun at last breaking through and blazing down in uninterrupted glory for the whole day; then evening after evening, a clear, brilliant sunset, an amethyst afterglow sinking down into

calm star-blazing nights. A week's rain in mid-June had put matters right with the crops, washing the dust out of the earth's eyes, and again the summer settled down radiant and glowing. It was a summer for love, for youth, for mating. In the forest only could one open one's eyes to the full, and the cool green and amber light drew Peter and Nina into its depths, bewitched. . . .

A distant bell, Netherwood Hall, calling its workmen back from their dinner, woke them out of their dream.

"We too must go back to our work," said Nina.

"I begin to understand those hermit chaps of the Middle Ages. It must have been a fine affair to cut all one's responsibilities and ties and jobs, and live in the depths of some forest like this on what the more foolish brought one as homage."

"One might do worse, but I should have to have a garden round my hermitage."

"This man I am going to stay with—the Crab, we call him—has done much the same

thing. He lives all alone in the hulk of an old yacht up a muddy creek. We've always thought him a bit mad, but I'm beginning to believe that he is the only sane one of us all."

"But no one can live to himself alone. You can't drop your responsibilities, once you are born into them, any more than you can with any comfort discard an arm or a leg. They are as essential to your character as your limbs are to your body."

"I think we make a fetish of our responsibilities, all the same. Your garden has begun to teach me more of the essentials of life."

"What do you call them?"

"Health, work, and love."

"What an odd trio to put together."

"In other words, open air, daily bread, and true comradeship . . . everything else can go overboard."

"Has my garden taught you that?" Nina caught her breath a little with the question.

"Yes." He said it very low and very

emphatically, and silence fell between them, for there was too much in their thoughts for speech. As, presently, he held the little green gate open for her she looked up quietly, and met his eyes. Unflinchingly, silently they looked at each other, a long quiet look, and in it each read a world of possibilities, half promised, half withheld, had things been different. With that look came knowledge, and Peter struggled against it no longer. He knew now what he had but dimly guessed before.

Yet, as he held the gate for her, he gave no sign of the rush of feeling that swept over him. Whatever wild impulse surged up, he controlled it, and followed her quietly in, closing the gate behind him.

Again, as yesterday, they took up their work, and the sweet sanity of the garden labour calmed the trouble in them. With hoe and water-can and work came comradeship, and the passionate depths that had opened beneath these two closed again, safely bridged.

.

So passed the first of these three days, and so in much the same way went the second, but on the third the test became intolerable.

The Colonel was to return that day, and that night also the Brackenridges were to bring a small party down to Netherwood for the week-end. . . . That night the dream would be over. . . .

Up in the woods at noonday one could hear the stillness of the summer heat. The leaves did not move save for a faint shiver in the top branches where the winds had been caught and lay stirring a little in their sleep. The birds were silent, the silence itself sang for them.

On the moss round the tree-trunks, just in that open space I told you of before, they sat staring out before them to the freedom of the open sea.

No words of import passed between them. In the face of a great crisis men are silent, women speak of trivial things.

So still they were that a rabbit came out of a hole near by, and sat enquiringly on its

haunches. Peter's short laugh sent it scudding away to the undergrowth. The tense silence settled down again. Suddenly Nina made a little movement as of pain, and Peter turned slowly, desperately towards her.

What would have happened then, who can tell? Fate, with one of those swift, decisive moves that sometimes save and sometimes damn us, intervened.

Below the little open space ran a path, a track merely, seldom used. As Peter made that desperate movement, ready to face things out, a twig or two snapped, there was a scuffle in the bushes, and a shaggy, intelligent, rough-haired terrier made his appearance, snuffling round them.

With a contraction of the heart, Nina recognised him as an old friend—he was the dog of the Reverend Vicar of Littleborough. His master followed, tramping cheerily and beating the bushes with his stick.

At first he did not see the two who sat there, so still, panic-stricken. Then calling his dog off he saw, and in the instant's stunned

surprise that unconsciously showed in his face, Nina felt the flush sweep over her face and flood even her neck. She hated herself for it, but could not prevent it with the most iron self-control. We must remember that once this Vicar of Littleborough had loved her, and she had possibly walked with him in these very woods. It was hateful, this moment, while it lasted, yet Nina in her sane self thanked God for it. The Vicar raised his hat, hesitated a second, and decided not to stop. That second's hesitation was sufficient to restore to Nina her balance in the universe. Composedly she called a friendly greeting to the Vicar, patted the terrier, and man and dog passed on, puzzled but reassured.

Peter, feeling like a man dragged back from the edge of a precipice, turned to her with a ghost of his whimsical smile. She rose, abrupt, cool, friendly.

"We must go back," she said, "look how the sun is catching the tree-tops."

"Yes, ripping, is n't it?" Peter pulled out his watch. "Jove, yes, it's quite late."

The crisis was averted—the crucial moment passed. Trivialities came to the rescue, the magic of the three days was held at bay. At the little green gate he left her, and the parting was formal, almost stiff . . . pitifully inadequate to the glorious three days of comradeship.

But it was all that they could do.

Thank heaven that civilisation has bestowed at least two gifts upon us—formality and triviality—cloaks wherewith to hide our shivering, naked souls.

They stood at the green gate no more than a fraction of a second, a hesitating second, then Nina turned and went down through the pergola, and Peter up the path into the wood.

At the head of the wood, just where it enters the wood, he turned, impelled by one of his uncontrollable impulses. He saw her figure far down the path . . . Would she turn? would she look back? If she did—if she did . . . something seemed to sing in his head, suffocating him. Suddenly she seemed

to turn, to half hesitate. . . . He made a wild step towards her, in another second he would have been with her, the barrier down, his word forgotten.

But she had turned only to snip off a dead rose from its stalk, and in a moment the end of the path had hidden her from view.

Then the passion surged up in Peter.

"She's so cool . . . she's so damnably cool. . . . And I'm . . . my God . . . I'm, . . . " He turned on his heel and strode wildly back through the forest to Netherwood.

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In the stuffy drawing-room of the Vicarage two ladies sat at tea, and the Vicar, in from his walk, handed them stale rock-cakes.

Somehow the desultory talk veered round to Nina Maynard.

"I saw her to-day in the woods," he said nonchalantly—he was very human, was the Vicar, and itching to know who the stranger could have been.

"In the woods, really?" Mrs. Admiral was thrilled at once. "Was she alone?" In

Littleborough it is unusual for young women to wander through the woods unless there is some special inducement.

"Oh, no," said the Vicar innocently, "there was a man with her—I don't know who."

"What was he like?" Both ladies spoke together, then glanced at each other, annoyed at so doing.

But the Vicar, absorbed in placing half a saccharine tablet in his second cup of tea, noticed nothing.

"Oh," he said with elaborate carelessness, "a thin chap, with a longish face. . . . I really hardly looked at him . . . clean-shaven, I think."

The two ladies nodded excitedly at each other. I am sorry to say there was triumph in at least the Vicar's mother's face. Mrs. Admiral looked more troubled.

Presently the Vicar went out to conduct the choir-practice.

His mother watched him out and carefully shut the door after him, returning to her guest with an alert and excited face.

"The hussy," she snorted.

"They must be old friends," Mrs. Admiral protested weakly.

But the face of the Vicar's mother was determined and her word was final.

"Hussy," she repeated.

There was no hope for Nina Maynard.

CHAPTER IX

THE CRISIS

THE night was hot, hot to suffocation; not a leaf was stirring. Out of the deep sky the stars shone, supernaturally clear, bright, and steady. In the west gathered a dark bank of cloud, like the massing of armies before an onslaught.

The drawing-room of the White House was intolerably airless, though the big French windows were flung open to the full; there was no breath of air to enter.

Nina sat with a book, trying to read. She had her own candle alight on the little old-fashioned table beside her, and a moth fluttered round about and through it with irritating stupidity. She longed to fling her book at it. In the other corner, under the lamp,

sat the Colonel playing Patience. He was one of those who played his game aloud. Usually, Nina was so used to this that she did not notice it. But to-night it was intolerable, as the hot night was intolerable. In the corner a grandfather's clock ticked and ticked, slowly, unbearably.

"Now," said the Colonel with triumph, "if I only had a red queen . . . I could get the whole lot on to the king and move off. . . . If I only had a red queen . . . a red queen. . . ."

Her book was a *Life of Charles Kingsley*, seeing that it was Sunday, and some dim remembrance of her mother made her keep to such books. It seemed wonderfully dull.

"In the religious world the Anglican question occupied one large section of the Church, and the tide set Romewards. Clergymen wrote to ask his advice for saving members of their flock from Popery. . . ."

Good heavens, how dull it was, and that wretched moth would be bound to be caught

soon, and then it would sizzle out on the table and the polish would be spoilt. . . .

"Not a red queen yet . . . not one in the pack . . . there can't be . . . blessed if I can get one."

Oh, that interminable game of Patience. Nina found herself praying fervently that a red queen would come, and come soon. . . .

Kingsley was an impossible person, even for his age. . . .

The clock ticked on. . . .

"Got it," burst out the Colonel suddenly. "Look here, my dear, look here . . . I move that knave on to the queen, and the seven, eight, nine on to the ten . . . bring it down and move the whole up, so that I get the four, five, six, and here's a two, three, and there you are. . . . Isn't that splendid? here, my dear, look here."

Of course Nina did not look. It was all gibberish to her, anyway. She only, with a last effort at self-control, said, "Splendid, Daddy," and tried to go on with her book.

"I confess myself unable to cope with that

school, so alluring as it is to the minds of an effeminate and luxurious aristocracy. . . ."

What was it all about? What was Peter Marchant doing at Netherwood? He was with Muriel . . . with Muriel . . . with Muriel. . . . She pictured them in the drawing-room, the open window, the terrace outside. . . . He and Muriel would be together there in that cool corner looking down into the gardens . . . or no, perhaps they had wandered off into the Rosary . . . together. She thought of the girl's youth and flower-like prettiness, and with a wild revulsion of her ordinarily placid nature the thought became intolerable to her. At last she understood bitter, blank jealousy, unbearable pain that it is.

Like a wise woman she started to read again.

"I am convinced of one thing more and more, by experience, that the whole question is an anthropological one. 'Define a human being' ought to be the first query. . . ."

What did it matter?

"I must have a black nine," murmured the Colonel. "There's one . . . if I could only clear it away . . . ah, that's better . . . three on four, and both on to the five six. . . ."

Intolerable . . . intolerable.

Suddenly the garden called her, clear, cool, and inviting. . . . It called her to itself, to lay her wild, restless, desperate soul on its quiet lap, to be soothed, straightened out, and restored. She must go. She must go to it.

For a little while she fought against it, tried to rebuild the flung-down walls of her own self-contained, calm nature. For a little while the clock ticked, the Colonel moved red or black eights, or threes or kings, the moth flittered round the candle. . . . But the *Life of Kingsley* swam before her eyes; she could not take it in.

Always she saw the drawing-rooms at Netherwood, the gay crowd, Peter and Muriel. . . .

Then something snapped within her . . . it was the last remnant of her own nature.

Quietly (for habit is strong, and a thing to

be thankful for) crossing the room, she put her book back in the case, and returning blew out her candle, not in time to save the moth, who had just sizzled himself out on the polished table.

"I'm going for a breath of air up into the garden, Daddy," she said in her usual slow voice; "if you want to go to bed and lock up, just leave the garden door for me."

She gave him her usual good-night kiss on his forehead, and the Colonel, without looking up, murmured, "Very well, my dear, don't be late. Good-night," and sank back absorbed in an intricate move to secure a red two.

Out in the garden it seemed for an instant as though sanity would return to her. Her own dear garden, that she loved and gave so much of herself to . . . what would it not give back to her to-night? Up the pergola path she went, slowly as was her custom, but her heart beating wild and strong in her.

The steady stars floated in the deep sky, not a leaf stirred in the garden. One by one

the roses, half hidden in the darkness, cried their welcome to her as she passed. Their voices calmed her, drew her back into herself, as the cool voice of a friend steadies one in a dangerous moment. Up into her own garden. . . .

Then it was all over with her self-control. In one place she had made a bed of white night-scented stock and tobacco-plant . . . the mingled fragrance of these came to her, strong, sensuous, alluring. It was intolerable, intolerable. Her love surged up in her heart, suffocating her. Every fibre of her being cried out for Peter. She felt suddenly and physically weak before it, and fell on her knees, burying her face among the white flowers. The wonderful scent brought no comfort to her, only a mad desire. She knelt still, numb, and dazed by the great calamity of her love.

So still, so absorbed in her tumultuous thoughts was she that she did not hear the man's footsteps as he came down the wood path. He had come quickly, as it were,

without thinking, without pause for thought, driven to her by the life-force surging within him.

He saw her kneeling there, not ten paces from him, by the white flowers, saw her in profile, her white face showing clearly in the starlight . . . he saw the expression, the stillness of her, and knew that it was with her as with himself.

The enormity of what had happened came home to him suddenly, pitilessly, and without knowing he called her name across the garden.

“Nina . . . Nina. . . .”

She did not start; it was as if she had known it would happen; but she turned slowly and saw him standing there on the further side of the green gate, hatless, in evening clothes. She saw his face, white and strained, and his thin figure showing dimly against the forest trees.

“Peter.”

Then she rose and came unsteadily towards him.

Scarcely knowing what he did, he took both her hands and held them in a grip that hurt her, it was so tense and nervous.

Words failed between them. They had each used the other's name, that seemed enough.

At last he spoke incoherently.

"I came through the woods . . . I had to . . . it was impossible there, the crowd, the silly chatter, the Bridge . . . the damned idiots . . . the . . . the . . . My God, I wanted you . . . you . . . and the garden and the . . . the peace of you. . . . That's all that matters . . . I love you . . . you know it. . . . I love you."

The woman made no answer, only met his eyes, dumbly imploring.

Another fierce, tense silence.

"You were right. Love can't be bought or conjured . . . it comes . . . it's there at once or not at all. . . ."

"We should never have met." She spoke very low, very quietly.

"We had to meet, we had to love."

"And will have to suffer. . . ."

"Not you . . . my God . . . not you."

Her lips twisted into a little smile.

"Do you think I care . . . for my . . . pain?"

"You shan't suffer," he spoke fiercely.

"What does anything matter but our love?"

"Your word matters."

"More than life? More than destiny?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . I don't know. . . ."

Then silence fell again. Around them the garden gave up its sweet smell, like incense before the altar of love, but the scent of flowers does not help to straighten out such matters. To-night it almost overpowered them. . . .

The bank of cloud, gathering in the west, drew slowly over the whole sky. Low thunder rumbled in the distance. They did not hear it, standing there, staring hopelessly into each other's eyes.

Still the little green gate lay between them, he had even dropped her hands . . .

it seemed as though there was no need for physical touch, so closely did their souls unite in the isolation of the darkness.

They were no children, these two, looking terrified into a deep hole of rushing waters—but man and woman of full-grown souls, face to face with a great and simple human problem.

On one side lay life and joy, the fulfilment of Nature's laws, on the other, honour and a void.

As usual it was the woman who sought refuge in trivial matters.

"How did you know I would be here?" she asked.

"God knows. . . . I never thought you would n't be. I never dreamt of finding the garden empty. . . . I never thought at all . . . I just came. . . ."

"Away from her . . . from all of them . . . to me?"

"Yes, to you. Did n't you know I would come? . . ."

She looked at him truthfully.

"No—no—I never thought you cared . . . like that."

"I believe I cared the moment I came down this path and through the green gate."

"When did you know I cared? . . ."

"Not till to-night, I suppose. . . . Oh, I did though. . . . But I've been an utterly selfish brute. . . . I've never thought of you . . . I've thought of nothing but what a damnable mess I've made of things."

She suddenly lifted her head and looked at him squarely.

"I'm glad you never thought . . . you might not have come to-night . . . and I am glad you came. . . . I'm glad you . . . you love me. . . ." Her voice dropped suddenly and softly at the end.

"Glad . . . even if . . .?"

"Yes."

"Thank God."

"To have loved and be loved . . . is the most wonderful thing in the world . . . no matter what happens . . . nothing can change it."

"You say that—and yet you would send me back to her?"

No answer.

"Would you, wonderful woman that I love?"

Holding himself in strong check, he yet moved a little unconsciously towards her. It was enough. . . . She turned suddenly and fiercely on him.

"Yes . . . yes, go . . . go to her. You have given your word to her . . . you belong to her . . . go . . . go. . . ."

Peter, white to the lips, looked at her quietly.

"You mean that?"

"Yes . . . go, Peter."

"Final?"

"For God's sake go." Her voice shook.

"Good-bye . . . my only love . . ." he said, and could not face her eyes.

Shaking, she moved away from him, and down the path, and he turned with bowed shoulders, unable to watch her go.

Then Nature took matters into her own

hands. The thunder-storm, which had been moving unheeded swiftly above their heads, coming closer with every clap, burst suddenly right over them. There was a blinding flash of lightning, followed swiftly by a terrific peal of thunder. Never in her life had Nina been frightened by thunder, but to-night her nerves were utterly unstrung.

Cowering suddenly, she turned with a faint cry of "Peter," and held out her hands blindly towards the gate. In a moment he had turned, run down the little path, vaulted the green gate, and had her in his arms.

She clung to him unresisting, her head bowed to his breast, and he held her fiercely, hungrily. . . .

So they stayed while the storm raged above their heads and the rain pelted on them.

He bent over her, whispering burning incoherent words of love, and she heard them, and them only, amid the raging storm. . . .

At last it passed over and the sky cleared.

. . .

She raised her head and spoke quietly,



"AS YOU DECIDE SO MUST IT BE," SHE WHISPERED
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gently, all the passion gone out of her voice.

"It rests with you, my beloved . . . you must decide . . . you are stronger than I am."

"God help me," he said simply.

With the passing of the storm, the beaten flowers quietly lifted their heads into the cooled night air. The peace of them entered into Nina's soul.

"As you decide so must it be," she whispered again. "I am a woman, and love is the whole of a woman's life. . . . I am not fit to decide for us. . . ." She lifted her lips up to be kissed.

He bent and kissed them, a long, long kiss, with all the world in it . . . their first, their last, their only kiss . . . but to them worth all the rest of time. There is always one moment in one's life when one understands eternity. . . .

Then gently she slipped out of his arms and passed down through the dripping pergola—quiet, self-contained.

As he went out through the green gate, and through the woods, dripping wet and humid, something of Nina's cool, quiet spirit entered into him. The wild tumult was passed that had driven him to her that night, away from the brilliant, hot drawing-room, the maddening chatter, the business of the Bridge-tables, above all from Muriel's irritating nothingness . . . driven him from all that to the cool, quiet garden of the woman he loved.

The dripping trees, and the sticky earth beneath his feet, gladdened him, quieted his mind. To-morrow, yes . . . to-morrow he had an awful problem to face, a silent battle to fight out with himself—but that would be to-morrow. For to-night there was the wonderful dream of all that had just passed in the garden, the knowledge of Nina's love . . . the memory of her kiss . . . They had been standing close to the tobacco plant bed when it happened, and the pungent smell of the plants came suddenly to his senses, overpowering them.

Then he became acutely conscious of the miserable dripping state of his evening clothes; he had not waited for coat or hat. He was soaked through and rather enjoyed the feeling; it seemed to cleanse his past life from him. For once he did not wonder what his man would think of him.

Love, the best thing in the world, went with him through the dripping woods, and when that happens, you know that nothing else can ever matter.

And love went with Nina down the pergola path, and quietly through the house, and up into that débutante's room, with its ten-year-old shabbiness, and knelt with her there by the window, entering her long, long thoughts, hallowed and full of peace.

For to a woman the greatest hour of her life is that in which she knows that the man she loves, loves her. She can muse on it for hours and ask nothing further of fate.

So musing, Nina knelt on till the stars vanished one by one, and the first faint light of dawn showed in the east.

It was a pale dawn, blurred and colourless.

Then she crept into bed and slept the quiet sleep of a little child.

CHAPTER X

THE METHODS OF THE CRAB

DO you know Sussex mud? In any place where the sea rushes exuberantly up a creek like a boy let out to play, and retreats again, shy as the same boy seeing that he is observed, you will find it to perfection. It is brown, purple green, a million colours, left glowing and sparkling by the retreating tide, so shallow as to be almost transparent. More fascinating, in truth, is a Sussex creek at low tide than at the full, if the charm be only realised.

The Crab had realised it many years ago, when, having dissipated his large patrimony to a wild extent, a wastrel on the face of the earth, he had once somehow found himself among a crowd of artist friends, at Bosham, on the harbour of Chichester.

They knew the worth of this mud and its colouring, this motley collection of souls, and the Crab—he was the “Crab” even in those days, owing to a peculiar sideways gait of his giant body—had its praises, its wonder, its damnable unpaintability, dinned into his ears for a whole summer before he even looked at the mud.

Then no one knew what had happened, but one day the Crab disappeared from the circle, and vanished utterly.

He was missed—men, and women too, asked each other, puzzled and regretful, why he came no more; for the Crab was popular, with the popularity of any big, good-tempered man with seemingly plenty of money and his hand for ever in his pocket. It was dramatic, this vanishing, and for long it was a topic of conversation. Theories were advanced and rumours circulated, and then gradually he was forgotten, save by the half-dozen or so friends, who, whether they knew or not, kept their speculations to themselves, anxious or trustful.

Gradually they ceased to talk of him.

It was Peter Marchant who had found him, living in the hulk of a yacht, and become a part of the mud itself, true to his nickname. For the hulk so lay that at high-water she was afloat, the shore only reachable by a wooden gangway, and when the tide was out, which somehow it usually was, she settled down comfortably into her own berth in the Sussex mud.

The Crab had become a hermit, and was happy.

What had happened in the interval Peter never asked, but it seemed that the Crab, whose hand, as I say, had ever been in his pocket, had had just enough left to purchase a small annuity and the old hulk, with the lease of a three-acre field on shore, adjoining the creek.

He was shy of returning to his set, and Peter and a few other intimates attributing this to the fact that his generous nature could not bear to be among them on a new footing, kept his seclusion a masonic secret, and to

them the hulk became a retreat, a refuge, a true hermitage.

The Crab was always busy, always cheerful, and nearly always hungry (for the more you eat the more you had to wash up). He lived entirely alone, chiefly because he could get no one to share the peculiar vicissitudes of the hulk; and keeping her watertight, working in his garden on shore, cooking and doing for himself, kept him at work from morning to night. He never wore a coat save in the depths of winter, when some strange old overcoat made its appearance, his usual costume being grey flannel trousers, a collarless shirt, and disreputable rubber shoes, which gave him more of a crab-like gait than ever. This was somewhat different to the immaculate Crab of the old days, but though at first his puzzled intimates felt that he had in some way lost caste, in a couple of years, there was not one who would have had a thing altered for worlds. What the Crab had lost in humanness he had gained in humanity. To his few friends he became at once Father

Confessor, doctor, and general adviser. There was little that a course of the Crab would not cure.

Such was the man to whom Peter turned in the face of his crisis.

The Crab, extremely busy, extremely hot, was desperately engaged in roofing in half the deck of his hulk. What made him think of doing such a thing in the middle of the hottest summer for years, only the Crab himself knew. He did all the work himself, roughly but thoroughly, with an extraordinary element of luck about it, that increased the belief of his friends that the Crab was supernaturally guarded.

In the midst of this mighty work befell the unusual sight of a small telegraph boy, marching boldly up the Crab's sacred gangway.

He looked up from his hammering with puckered forehead.

"Where there are telegrams there is trouble," was one of his sayings. They always made him nervous, his friends noticed.

"May I come to you . . . want work . . . urgent . . . Peter," he read.

The pucker on his forehead smoothed itself out.

"Go, my child," he said, addressing the boy, "back over the gangway, and a few paces to your right. There you will find a stile, and over the stile raspberries. Eat until I have written the answer." The Crab spoke with a pompous burr which he affected with most people when not shouting.

The small boy grinned and went; once before he toiled the weary three miles of land and water and mud with a wire for the Crab, and that time the strawberries had been ripe. Such was the Crab's way. . . . Tommy would have done anything for him.

To Peter he replied—"Putting roof on Husk. Potatoes ready to dig." And it was not an easy matter for the Crab to write this. True, the reply-paid form had been given him, but then there was the pencil to be procured, and pencils were always shy in the Husk, for method was no peculiar gift of the

Crab. Then it was a difficult matter to find a clear firm surface on which to write—the whole of the upper deck was littered up with bits of roof-to-be, tools and things of all sorts, and down below the only table was a mass of books, papers, clothes, and the Crab's late breakfast, for he never cleared away one meal till it was time to prepare another. At last he sat down laboriously on the deck, and with one sweep of his arm clearing a chair, succeeded in printing the message fairly legibly with a stump of pencil found among the jam-pots in the storeroom. I tell you all this in detail that you may have some idea of the Crab's ways and daily life, for it was a joyful life such as is given few men to lead.

In the Crab's life everyday difficulties of food, raiment, and behaviour were eliminated, almost non-existent. He had no worries of the present, at least; how much the past may have haunted him through quiet nights on the mud I cannot tell; if it did none knew of it, for like many people with a capacity for receiving confidences, he gave none in return,

and there were years of his life which were a sealed book even to his intimate friends.

On board the Husk one may have felt the discomforts of such a free life, but one had to feel the joy of it—a breath of original existence blown into the midst of an over-civilised world.

Tommy having departed over the trackless shore, the Crab settled placidly at his work again, but the pucker still showed slightly between his brows. All the Crab's worries came from the outside, as it were, thrust on his broad shoulders by his less wise friends. Since he had adopted his independent life, it was a perpetual gentle puzzle to him why all his friends did not do the same thing. He did not urge them to do it, but quietly acquired the attitude of belief that one day all men, who were gradually becoming lunatics, would, with a gigantic swing back of the pendulum, find themselves adopting his methods, in order to save their sanity. Sometimes he hoped for their own sakes they would know how to build their houses better than he did.

That was on the occasions when, for instance, on a cold night in winter, he would hear with the incoming tide, strange gurgles and creaks, and would find, searching below, three feet of rising water in the hold, and his stores of tinned stuffs, jam, and cocoa swimming gaily about. But then, he always argued, the Husk was an exception. The Crab made few preparations for his guest; it was part of what he called his cure that his visitors should take life literally as they found it. Sleep rough, fare rough, work hard, and rest well, was his programme, and those who did not enjoy it did not come again. Of the dozen men he still knew, there were but two or three who did not turn up every year.

There was a spare cabin down below, with a bunk in it, but for himself the Crab slung a hammock on deck and slept therein, wet or fine, through the summer. There was a spare hammock too if his guest chose to sling it up. Most of them did. It was rather glorious to wake up on a summer's morning surrounded by miles of the Sussex mud.

Now in order to get to the Husk, as the Crab fondly called his old hulk, it was necessary, as a rule, to go to Horsham and change—change again somewhere else, and drive three miles to a little fishing village. Here was a ferry; you just stood on the shore and shouted long and loud for this, and if you were blessed by the gods, from somewhere unseen a boat would shoot out, and grounding somewhere near you, give you a long and slippery walk, and a plank whereon to climb into the bows, your bags after you. The boat usually put you down somewhere in mid-mud, and arriving at last on the opposite shore, you found nothing—nothing but more miles of mud and seaweedy foreshore. There was an outlying, windswept farm with a couple of cottages, and it was just a mile round the coast that the Crab had moored his hulk and hired his field. You had to walk it and carry your bag yourself. All this if the tide was low, as it usually seemed to be. If it was high, the Crab met you with a dingy, waiting offshore by the village ferry. He seldom

went to the village itself, unless it was to ask advice of the wise fishermen that were always busy about their boats on the shore.

To-day it was low tide when Peter arrived, but he was familiar with the ways of it, and found at once the little shingle path that led over the mud to the edge of the silver stream. The very familiarity of the way helped to restore him to his place in the universe, and by the time he had stood and shouted long calls for the ferry-boat, and gripped his own bag from the small boy carrying it, and heard the scrunching of the keel in the pile of sand that served for a jetty, he felt a glimmering of peaceful reasoning coming back to him.

On the other side of the stream he found the Crab, looking large and wholesome, in a soft shirt, flannel trousers, and a large pipe, stretched on his back, knees drawn up, a disreputable hat of sorts covering his face. He was almost hidden in the long grass stuff that grew close to the shore, as it does everywhere in these southern creeks, and Peter nearly

trod on him before he saw him. He removed the hat gently with his foot.

"Crab," he said wearily. "Oh, land-crab, what made you moor the Husk so near civilisation?"

The Crab opened first one eye then the other, and then shut both again.

"Because," he burred, "I should say, chiefly because she leaked so badly that I dared not take her farther round."

"It is true," said Peter, "that you are six miles from a station that no train ever reaches—and half-way up a harbour to which no ship ever comes—that you have no daily paper, and no post . . . and yet . . ."

The Crab sat up and looked at him suddenly and keenly.

"These potatoes," he shouted, "they must be dug at once."

"At once," said Peter, wearily shouldering his bag again.

Together and in silence they walked along the shore to the Husk.

Now concerning Peter's time with the Crab

there is little to say. He did what all men should try to do at least once in their lives—worked with his hands in the open air. It is a fine thing—simple manual labour. As the body works, every fibre moving, the brain is set free on holiday. It is the simple panacea for all evils, and the man who has never tried it has missed a great deal in life.

On shore the Crab leased a field of two or three acres, which he cultivated with a lazy enthusiasm. When he first came he knew nothing of gardening; to use his own phrase, he did not know a cabbage from a rose-tree. But drifting into it as casually as he had literally drifted into the mud, he found he had “green hands” as the gardeners say. What he planted, grew, and half of his success was due to the fact that he never ceased to marvel at the wonder of it.

“Look at that,” he burred, grasping Peter’s arm, “look at that row of peas—did you ever see anything like them? Just put them into the ground, my dear chap, and that’s what happens. . . . I can’t help it . . . they come.”

He made enough for his primitive needs by sending this produce every week to the market at Chichester. He never went there himself, but some one's cart, that brought him things once a week, loaded itself up with baskets of vegetables, and the Crab had no further trouble.

"Not a fortune, my friend, but a living—all that a man can want for happiness and comfort, my garden brings me . . . could bring any one . . . you try," he said to Peter.

"By Gad, I want to, Crab, old chap."

"You *want* to? Lord, that's half-way there," the Crab shouted. "Come along . . . take that fork there . . . you shall start by potatoes . . . they're the beginning of the gardener's credo."

Peter took the fork resignedly. He was dead tired, but anything not to think. He had done too much of that in the last twenty-four hours. He worked steadily under the Crab's orders for some time mechanically. Then the heaven-born smell of the freshly turned sod suddenly arrested him. The tor-

ture of his thoughts of Muriel seemed suddenly far away, and the earth was close, a thing alive, and good to touch; the soil clung to his fingers as he worked it off the potatoes, for the terrific thunder-storm of the night before had been all over the country, and the earth still reeked of wet.

Comforting him always came the thought that Nina too would turn to the soil for consolation; it was the same earth that both touched—mother-earth, the consoler, the purifier. It was no longer torture to think of that upper garden, where she had clung to him, where they had had the one hour of human life fulfilled.

Muriel and her butterfly, shadowless, depthless life and surroundings vanished with the problem facing him. It was not solved, this problem, but he simply ceased to think of it. Instead the kind brown earth and its smell filled him, taking possession of his being.

The Crab, saying nothing but watching keenly, saw with the intuition of the gardener that the good toil in the open air had

begun its work; he left him to his own devices, and went off to prepare their primitive supper.

Peter's weariness fell from him, and he worked closely, intently, and the vision of what should be spread hazily before him on the brown earth. Things that had been begun to shape themselves in proportion to things as they were, and together evolve the things that were to be. He worked on till sunset, and Knowledge drew near over the misty fields and stood beside him.

He turned transformed to grasp her . . . the Crab's bellow from the hulk broke the illusion.

"Supper if you want it."

Peter thrust the fork deep into the ground and left it.

Picking his way over the cabbages, a thin smile hovered over his lips . . . the furtive smile of a man who having seen a vision, though disbelieving it, would not part with its secret for untold gold. . . .

All this from the digging of a potato.

CHAPTER XI

THE ONLY THING IN THE WORLD

IT is a woman's work to wait, and a woman's way to wait in a strange patience, unknown to men. The way of some women, that is—the women who are wise and withdrawn into themselves. And in this matter of waiting there is no such kindly help as a garden. There are other occupations as absorbing, as exacting; there are none so sympathetic. A garden gives back to you a thousand-fold what you have put into it—both of matter and time. You may paint pictures, but what good are they to you in the hour of your need? If you want to absorb yourself, you must set out to paint a new one, which you may have no inspiration to do—it is no use trying to get comfort out

of your old ones; and so with many other things. But a garden, the mere being in it, will hold you, the soil of it be your strength, the flowers of it your peace.

To Nina, after the storm of passion that had swept over her and Peter, the garden was a source of infinite peace and comfort, and here, day by day, she worked and waited; not fretting herself with wondering what the future held for her—she had given the decision into Peter's hands, and with him lay the rest. What he decided she would abide by, unquestioning, undoubting. As I have said, the one great moment in a woman's life is the moment that she knows that she is loved by the man she loves. That for her is the beginning and end of all things; life holds little beyond it. The great wonder, undreamt-of, that Peter loved her, realised for the first time that night he was driven to her through the woods, filled her with the pure wonder of a child . . . she asked nothing more. Only always when working among her flowers, her hands would go on mechanically

weeding or planting, and her mind slipping out of its own groove would go wandering away to her beloved, revelling in the joy of possession, humble and proud at the same time, which is a woman's way. And now and then through the day her hands would suddenly fall idle, the tools dropping from them, and her eyes, looking away down the garden, would see unbidden the little figures of strange children, in blue and red overalls, busy grubbing among the flowers, and playing about the paths. In her hidden soul she was essentially a mother, and no one realised more than she how incomplete, void, is a garden without children. All her life she had secretly longed for them, children of her love. Now that her love had come to her, the dream of her life came uppermost unconsciously, was there before she knew. A woman's life is long because it is her way to live many hours over and over again, both in anticipation and retrospection. But she is not happy unless she has these "hours" in which to live. That week for Nina, her fate hanging in the bal-

ance, was the happiest of her life. So it passed, day after day in her garden, and her garden gave her peace. . . .

It was a gay time among the flowers, the month above all others when your care and time and tenderness will come back on you a thousand-fold, repaying you with rampant joyful outburst of colour and scent. Up in the garden was a blaze of good things; tall Delphiniums, blue and rose-pink Canterbury Bells and Campanulas, massed in their pale and deep colours, cheery Phloxes, red and white, and all fine hardy herbaceous children. Then there were the slighter annuals, the day-boarders, as it were, clamouring for notice; delicate things most of them—Love-in-a-mist—Shirley Poppies—Godetias—Nemophilas and fragile Cornflowers side by side with the sturdier Malopes, a blaze of carmine; and sweeter than all, the Stocks, of every shade from the giant night-scented “Princess of Wales” to the wonderful, delicate “Mauve Queen.” Fine children all of them, things to be lingered over, touched, picked with

care, and carefully tended. Day by day Nina spent among them, her only real companions—for they alone knew her secret. Had they not hung their heads while the torrent of passion swept over them which had caught her too in its meshes? . . . Had they too not lifted their heads in peace and calmness when the storm had passed, refreshed, strengthened with a new life in them? They were part of her, these flowers, one with her. Then, too, up in her garden, the Wallflower seed which she and Peter had planted together had suddenly begun to appear, tiny wee green things, just lightly piercing the brown earth, and that is the most wonderful of all the world's miracles. That one should take a handful of brown seed, fling it broadcast on a patch of land, and wait . . . that some marvellous, untold, unfathomed process should, without your interfering at all, break each minute seed and thrust up in some extraordinary way a couple of wee green leaves, then another couple, and finally make a little stalk bearing more leaves . . . meanwhile throwing

down into the earth tiny fibres searching for food . . . and so on till the seed has become a plant . . . and then bears coloured flowers . . . it is all simply unbelievable. The idea of the wild energy excited within each little seed—heaven knows how—defeats human thought. Yet we plant carelessly many handfuls of seed, and grumble confoundedly if they don't "come up." It is a marvellous affair, this planting of seed.

Nina watched the wallflowers-to-be with an absurd delight, and in childish wonder. The great miracle had never become stale to her, but this seed was different . . . they had planted it together. Sentimental . . . oh, yes, I suppose so, but, good heavens, how dull life would be without a little sentimentality. It is one of those pleasant by-roads that, shady, leafy, and hedged with flowers, lead to just the same place as the hard highroad, and get there just as quickly too.

At last, on the Friday evening, the peace of the week seemed drawing to an end. That night she knew that Peter would decide one

way or another, and though outwardly she was the same placid woman, calm and self-contained, inside her mind would not let her rest.

The Colonel that day was full of fuss, and rather crotchety. He had ordered a new greenhouse, on the strength of the aunt's legacy, which was to arrive that day, and he was still undecided as to where it should be erected. All day long he had stumped about the kitchen-garden and back premises with the groom-gardener and a measuring rule, muttering "fourteen feet by eight . . . can't get it in . . . can't get it in."

Perpetually he called Nina from the house or from her upper garden to inspect a new site, and then received her suggestions with scorn, and accused her of losing interest. It was all she could do to keep her own placidity unruffled, for her nerves were getting on edge, do what she would.

"Why not here, Daddy? It would get plenty of sun here."

"And what about the rhubarb, eh?"

The rhubarb appeared to wink at her, slowly and in the most exasperating manner.

"Well, a few feet to the right then won't hurt, and that would clear it."

"No, no . . . won't do at all . . . absurd idea. Where are the early peas to go if not under that wall? Ridiculous."

"Well, you must spoil something, Daddy," she said patiently.

"No need at all, no need at all . . . it's only a question of finding the right site. Now then, John . . . just measure this strip up to the celery . . . that's no good . . . try this way. . . . What the dickens are you striding like a camel for?"

And Nina would slip away to her garden, trying to absorb herself, and forget, only to be called down a few minutes later. So the day wore on.

At last the Colonel decided on his site, and John was busy levelling the ground. The rhubarb, by the way, suddenly confronted Nina in an odd part of waste ground near the stables and nodded to her pathetically,

drooping somewhat, and seeming to say patiently, "We knew it all along, you and I, but the old buffer would make a fuss." Nina reproved the rhubarb, and the Colonel pottered round John, worrying him with spirit-levels, and Nina with agitations over the early peas. And all the time all these things seemed to her to be remote, not of her world . . . like dim echoes of the town to the traveller who has just passed out into the country. She seemed, while moving serenely about her garden and house, doing her daily round of small jobs, to be living far away in some intimate world with Peter Marchant, very close to him, almost a part of him. She felt him near her at every turn of her thoughts, nearer than he had ever been before, and her heart beat sometimes furiously, knowing in some occult way that he had decided to come to her.

It was not till the greenhouse having arrived (in confused and agitating sections on a large and lumbering van), the Colonel and John being in their element and absolutely absorbed, she got quietly away into her own

room, that the demon of doubt suddenly attacked her.

“Supposing he does not come to me . . . if he decides the other way . . .” she had hardly thought of this at all . . . it came to her suddenly as a shock.

Whatever one’s theory of life and behaviour may be, the coming of Love uproots it all, and leaves you a shivering naked soul, conscious only of one thing . . . itself. Before Nina had realised the great thing that her love and his meant to them both, woman-like she had been ready, eager for sacrifice to what she was pleased to call their duty. But the moment that realisation had come, came also the knowledge of the futility, almost the “priggishness” of such sacrifice, and she thrust it from her with force and passion. When two people loved as they loved—had recognised almost instantaneously the true mate—what was the use of sacrifice to an idea, a convention? Peter was hers . . . not by right of her love for him, but of his love for her. . . .

Would he recognise this too?

She fought fiercely in her mind for a few moments, dreadful moments that all women have known, with the thought, but it obsessed her.

At last she could bear it no longer. She went quickly out of the house and up the pergola path . . . passing the kitchen-garden she saw, blindly, the Colonel and John still at the greenhouse, struggling helplessly with sections. The Colonel, hot and perspiring, called to her. For once in her life she did not heed him, but sped on up the path into the coolness of her own sanctuary.

They never failed her, these flowers. Now as ever they held out soft hands to her, but she scarcely saw them. She knelt down by the tobacco-plant and stock bed, for it was always the mingled scent of these that came to her, remembering that night. She stayed there silent, her mind numb, for many minutes.

An evening breeze wandering carelessly by, stirred the flowers and flung the scent over her, sensuous, alluring. It gave her utter-

ance; her mind, stirred too, became alive, saturated by the one thought.

"Come to me . . . Peter . . . come to me. . . . You are mine, not hers . . . it is our right to live together . . . come to me. . . ."

Intensely, she bent her mind to the thought, compelling, sending her thought outside herself, concentrating her will upon it. So she stayed, kneeling there, lost to time and space.

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Far away, down on the Sussex mud, strenuously hammering nails into the Crab's roof-to-be, Peter felt it come to him, this thought. . . . How it came he could not tell; all the week nothing else had obsessed his mind but the solution of his life. From the first evening, when he dug potatoes, he had been able to think clearly, too clearly. Out of the chaos of his passion there had evolved a terrible sanity. Worst of all, it had come to him that the sane way was the way of his own desire—and that is the thing most easily to be distrusted in life's difficulties.

He longed for Nina with his whole soul,

knew that his ultimate salvation lay in her quiet hands, but the thought of his broken word, the awful upheaval not only of his own life, but of many others, appalled him. Day by day he had worked hard as any labouring man, in the open air; he had fared lightly and slept rough, shaking thereby all that was artificial out of his life. . . . And the Crab had watched him, chuckling silently. He had his own methods, had the Crab, and they were strange. He gave Peter the most astonishing things to eat, most abominably cooked, and Peter had swallowed them unheeding. He set Peter the most strenuous of hard jobs, and Peter did them uncomplaining. He gave him the roughest of quarters wherein to sleep, and Peter slept without a murmur. And all the time the Crab asked no questions and gave no advice.

Then that evening suddenly Peter felt Nina's call to him. . . . Saw her clearly, kneeling in her garden calling to him. . . . For a moment he felt the world swerve about him. . . .

He flung down the hammer noisily on to the deck, and the Crab, who was laboriously sawing planks of wood, looked quietly up.

"I 'm going to knock off, old chap," said Peter, feeling round unconsciously for his coat, "going for a stroll," and without further explanation went down the gangway on to the shore and strode off. The Crab, saying nothing, puffed on, sawing his plank, but there was the beginning of a smile on his placid face.

Peter, plunging over the shore and fields, felt the old eternal song of life surging through his veins—the song that every man and woman hears sung once in a lifetime, the song that means that Love, and Love only, is the thing that matters, and all the rest of the things in this world are shadows, scarecrows, and fantasies.

A tremendous exaltation came over him with the decision. The wonder of his life with Nina spread out before him vaguely, like a mist that hangs over a landscape before dawn, full of hidden beauty, with great un-

guessed-at promise. He longed intensely to go straight to her that night and claim her, his love. But looked at squarely, scarecrows, shadows, and all, he knew that he must first go to Muriel, simply, and tell her the thing that had happened to him. Whether she would understand or not did not trouble him; anyhow, she would realise enough to give him his freedom. Then . . .

Plans began to shape vaguely in his mind, but the rest would lie with Nina.

He returned to the Husk in time for the evening meal.

Two strange pieces of meat lay on the table.

"Dinner's ready," said the Crab placidly.

"Right O . . . I'm hungry," said Peter. For a time he wrestled silently with the "dinner," and at last put down his fork.

"Hang it, Crab, old man, these chops are abominable."

For answer the Crab bounced out of his chair.

"Splendid," he shouted, "splendid . . . of course they're abominable. . . . I can't cook

. . . never could. All the food you 've eaten here has been abominable—*But this is the first time you 've noticed it* . . . splendid, old chap, you 're yourself again."

And the Crab, bolting to a cupboard, produced an excellent cold tongue, new cheese, and other good things, to eat, planting them in triumph before his guest.

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That night, on deck, they sat smoking, and Peter at last told him his story, while the Crab listened silently.

"And now?" he said quietly, when Peter had finished.

"There's only one thing in the world, old chap . . . you know that, don't you?"

After a long silence the Crab answered:

"Yes, I know it too."

And both men were silent thereafter, smoking far into the night.

CHAPTER XII

A DOMESTIC SCENE

AN unusual thing had happened to Mrs. Jimmy Brackenridge. She was disturbed out of her perpetual self-satisfaction; only vaguely at first, just an uncomfortable feeling at the back of her mind, but it could not be dislodged. She remembered the same feeling years ago, when Muriel had developed measles in the holidays in a hotel, and she had noticed the little red spots and had tried to believe they were only midge-bites.

What happened now was the feeling that all was not well between Peter and Muriel, and now, as then, the uncomfortable feeling was followed by rapid conviction, and then desperate panic.

What started the feeling is difficult to say.

"Was it something said? Something done?
Touch of hand, turn of head?" . . .

There had been rumours . . . nothing much. How she heard them would have been a puzzle to herself to say. But you and I, who are behind the scenes (that is the best of being a mere reader, and not an actor of the story), know that the Rectory tea-table had more than a finger in it. When there is one mind in the world absolutely convinced of a truth, that truth somehow spreads itself without words, almost without intention. Mrs. Vicar had found that her adding of two and two together had been too good a thing to keep to herself. Not that she had the slightest intention of spreading gossip, but, "My dear," she would say in extenuation, "a thing which you see with your own eyes, and which your son sees with his own eyes, is not gossip—it's fact." She thought seriously of writing to Mrs. Jimmy direct—but then the vision of that lady, wrapped up in innumerable coverings of self-satisfaction, forbade her that rash act. And, after all, there were ways, subtle ways. . .

Anyhow Mrs. Jimmy's armour was pricked, then gashed, and then fell from her altogether. To the outer world she was the same, or very nearly, because the habit of years is not broken in a week. It was still, "Oh, yes, we are getting on with dear Muriel's trousseau splendidly . . . such *lovely* things she has. She is *so* happy, dear child."

But was she happy? How had Peter's strange manner that last week-end at Netherwood, his long absence after dinner, his abrupt flight with only a note left the next morning, struck her? Had she noticed it, resented it, or understood? Mrs. Jimmy was on needles to know.

They returned to London on the Monday night, and plunged again into the whirl of dressmakers, shopping, and the eternal round of social engagements that occupied their whole life. Peter had not come to town; he did not write any explanation. Mrs. Jimmy's panic was complete.

At last, later on in the week, it grew too much for her, and she attacked Muriel. She

was not diplomatic, for diplomacy was not a weapon Mrs. Jimmy had ever had need of using. She was not sympathetic, because sympathy was a sentiment that did not exist in her private life; she was abrupt and direct.

It happened one night when they returned from a ball and Muriel knocked at her mother's door to say good-night.

"Muriel, come in and shut the door."

Muriel did so, and a little hardening of her mouth showed that she knew something was going to happen.

"Now tell me," went on her mother, "have you and Peter quarrelled?"

"No," said Muriel, "of course not."

"Where is he then?"

"Why on earth do you ask?" Muriel's tone was cool and defiant.

Mrs. Jimmy carefully arranged the necklet she had taken off in her jewel-case.

"It's no use prevaricating, Muriel. I insist on your telling. You must admit that Peter was a little strange, to say the least of

it, last week-end. . . . Has he written to you?"

"I don't know what you mean . . . of course he has written."

A faint look of relief came into Mrs. Brackenridge's face, until she noticed Muriel's pallor and hard-set mouth. Then panic seized her again, and this time overcame her.

"Muriel!" she said, and her voice was hard and determined, "there is something wrong between you and Peter. Tell me at once what it is."

"There is nothing, mother," said Muriel, again. "I don't know what you mean at all."

"If you allow anything to happen between now and your wedding-day owing to your stupidity . . . good heavens, child, what are you about? Can't you keep a man when you've got him?" Such women are not refined when they allow themselves to get into a panic.

"I don't know what you mean, mother," reiterated Muriel doggedly, but she was white to the lips. "And will you take care what

you say, please." Then Mrs. Jimmy subsided into a chair, and began to cry.

"My dear, don't disgrace me by being thrown over at the last minute . . . I could n't face it . . . I really could not. I should drown myself . . . what would people say? . . . and all your clothes . . . your father says now he does n't know how to pay for them . . . I could n't face him if it was broken off."

Muriel moved impatiently, but she spoke quite calmly.

"What has put the idea into your head?"

"Oh, something . . . something . . . I . . ."
Discretion unexpectedly prompted her to stop. Perhaps Muriel was a bigger fool than she thought. . . . She changed her sentence. "Something in Peter's manner last week-end . . . and his going off like that on Monday . . . and not being here now and all. And it did strike me, before he got the flu., that he did n't much enjoy going about everywhere with us. I hope I'm mistaken . . . I only hope I'm mistaken. . . ."

"Of course you are mistaken, mother," said Muriel levelly. "Peter is coming up at the end of the week."

"Oh, he is, is he?" Mrs. Jimmy, even in her undignified agitation, had the sense to grasp that there was nothing further to be got out of Muriel. "Why didn't you tell me before? And for heaven's sake, my dear child, do play your cards a little better . . . there, there, come here and say good-night . . . it was only for your own sake I said anything."

Muriel kissed her mother quickly, and was leaving the room, when suddenly she lost her own self-control. She turned and ran back to her, and burying her face on Mrs. Jimmy's astonished knees, burst out crying.

"Do you suppose I don't see," she sobbed passionately. "Do you suppose I don't care . . . of course something happened. . . . Oh, I don't know what . . . I don't know what. . . . But I won't lose him . . . I won't . . . I won't. . . ."

"My dear . . . my dear . . ." was all

Mrs. Jimmy, wildly agitated and panic-stricken, could say. "Of course you won't . . . with all your pretty frocks and the trouble and the presents . . . of course you won't. . . ."

"What do I care about the frocks and the presents?" cried Muriel, raising a passionate tear-stained face for a moment. "I tell you I love him, mummie, and I won't lose him . . . and he does love me . . . I know he does. . . ."

"Of course he does, my dear; do stop crying, for heaven's sake . . . what's the use of it? Don't be so silly . . ." said Mrs. Jimmy, quite oblivious of her own whimpers of a few moments ago. "It's all nonsense . . . It was stupid of me to put the idea into your head, but I thought you had been having one of your silly fits of temper. . . . Of course if you have n't, it is all right . . . it's only the flu. that has pulled him down, and the party at Netherwood was too much for him. Now dry your eyes and run off to bed, there's a good child. . . . It's frightfully late."



"'I WON'T LOSE HIM. . . . I WON'T, I WON'T.'"

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Mrs. Jimmy's comfort was as much to reassure herself as Muriel.

A few more sundry sobs and Muriel got up obediently. Her paroxysms of passion were violent but short-lived. She was incapable of probing very deeply into things, and her mother's suggestion about the influenza seemed a sturdy spar, rather than a straw to cling to in her tea-cup storm. She had inherited her mother's detestation of looking on the uncomfortable side of things . . . and she shrunk terrified from anything so utterly appalling as a broken engagement. Yet the words she had cried out in her passion were true without her understanding them. Peter's love was more to her at that time than any joy of the trousseau, the presents, the fact of being married, and she would endure to lose all, to keep that one thing.

In her room, five minutes later, she pored over the one note she had had from Peter since seeing him, the thing that had made her reply so glibly to her mother that she knew of Peter's doings.

"I shall see you in town at the end of the week.—PETER."

That was all there was in it, and its very clearness and simplicity was the most baffling part of it. His letters—there were not many of them—had never been diffusive; what was not merely an exchange of news was written in a quaint, fanciful style, such as one might write to a child . . . his notes had often been quaintly curt, something like this, yet not quite—and there was no address.

She slept with it under her pillow, and that pillow was soppy and damp with quiet childish tears of self-pity . . . poor little butterfly. Of her scene with her mother she scarcely thought again.

Not so with Mrs. Jimmy. The more she thought about the thing, the more agitated she became. Through the short-left hours of the night it came to her slowly that if Peter and Muriel had not quarrelled, it was worse, much worse. There must be something then in those absurd rumours she had heard . . . she could not think how . . . that Peter had

spent all that week in some woman's garden . . . she could even remember whose . . . that he had been seen frequently with another girl. . . . How she had laughed when she had heard them, and said to some one that people were always ready to say that sort of thing about engaged couples. Now . . . what if it were true? It was incomprehensible, of course . . . and absurd, of course it was absurd . . . of course.

Her panic grew deeper every moment.

She kept herself in hand for another day or so, then, unable to bear it any longer, she threw over every other engagement, and drove directly after breakfast to Mrs. Willoughby-Lang.

That lady was trying to keep her nerve and hands steady for a croquet match that afternoon at Hurlingham. So she had stayed in bed for breakfast, and was agitating herself wildly over keeping her thoughts from the game, by trying to read Haeckel as she dressed slowly in mid-morning. She had never been able to understand a word he wrote, naturally, so for some strange reason she

found him very soothing to the nerves. The announcement of Mrs. Brackenridge's visit, just as her maid was deftly placing the faultless coiffure provided by Bond Street, and she had reached Psychic Gradations, threw her into a most undesirable agitation.

"She must wait then . . . I'm not dressed yet . . . I must get to the end of this paragraph. . . . Mary, surely that's all down over my right ear. . . . I shan't hit a ball this afternoon . . . not a ball. . . . There, that must do . . . not a ball . . . bother the woman . . . not a ball. . . ."

And so on till she smilingly confronted Mrs. Jimmy in the drawing-room. Mrs. Jimmy soon burst out with her troubles . . . but she did so in her own way. It was extraordinarily difficult for the poor lady to suggest, in so many words, that there could ever be anything wrong with any of those things pertaining to her. For the first ten minutes Mrs. Willoughby-Lang could not follow at all, and could only go over her formula in her own mind, like a parrot.

"I must keep my nerves unruffled or I shall not hit a ball."

Then the drift of Mrs. Jimmy's words came home to her.

"Supposing . . . just supposing . . . that anything were to happen . . . if he were . . . if it were to be . . . *broken off*. . . ." It was the condensed horror in those last two words that brought the situation home to Mrs. Willoughby-Lang.

"You mean it's Peter . . . you're afraid . . . ?"

"Yes, yes . . . though of course he's such a dear . . . and just the man for Moonie . . . and so well-off, so very well-off . . . and all that." Mrs. Jimmy went unconsciously through her formula. "And I know she's devoted to him . . . but . . ."

"But what about him?"

Mrs. Brackenridge made one gesture of absolute despair.

"If he does, I shall drown myself . . . I could n't face it. I've spent hundreds on her clothes, and the presents are already coming

in every day. What would every one say?
. . . Oh, I could n't face it."

"What about Muriel?"

"I can't make her out."

"I don't see that you have much to go upon
. . . it's sure to be all right. . . . Often in
the middle of an engagement a man of temper-
ament gets sick of it—the fuss, the pre-
parations, the talk of it all. . . . I believe that
half the men in the kingdom would rather
carry us off and have done with it—no wed-
ding ceremony or trousseau or fusses at all
. . . and I believe they are right."

Mrs. Jimmy could not follow these flights.

"My dear," she said piteously, "I can't
think what you mean. Of course one must
have a wedding . . . and no girl could be
married respectably without a trousseau. It
is not my fault, if Peter's tired of that . . .
we could n't very well do without."

"I'm sure you're just fussing about
nothing. Why not hurry up the date a bit?"

"Oh, that's Jimmy's fault . . . he has
never gone against me before, but he says he

won't manage it till October at earliest. . . . You know, between ourselves, he's been what he calls 'dabbling in Finance' lately, and he has lent some one all his ready cash, or something. . . . It sounds funny, but I don't understand these things, and dear Jimmy is always right. But I do know that he has been rather worried with something lately, only what with the trousseau and the rush this season has been, I have n't had time to see much of him."

"But you think he won't let you have the wedding earlier?"

"No, he was quite firm about it . . . in fact, if dear Jimmy ever could be cross, he was almost snappy."

"Well, my dear, there's nothing to be done," said Mrs. Willoughby in a final sort of tone, "only I do think you are worrying about nothing. That gossip from Netherwood is absurd, of course, quite absurd. I can't think why you listened to it."

"I did n't. It only came upon me afterwards. You think it is all right really?"

Mrs. Jimmy was beginning to be restored to her usual pinnacle. "Of course I never thought that dear Moonie could ever lose a man's love like that. . . . You really reassure me?"

"Of course I do." Mrs. Willoughby's thoughts were flying back to Hurlingham, and she began fixing things into focus, to see how really straight her eye was.

At last, with much pressure of hands, and effusion, Mrs. Jimmy was ushered into the lift and shot down-stairs.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang strolled to the window and looked out. She had one of those pleasant flats in Knightsbridge, and her drawing-room windows, as I have said, looked out on to the Park, commanding a full view of the Row.

She watched idly for a long time, trying her favourite theory of composing her nerves, so as to give her whole attention to her beloved game in the afternoon. But do what she would, her thoughts turned to the problem of her friends, and vague, uncomfortable recol-

lections of her own feelings at Netherwood in June assailed her. She remembered that night after dinner when she had caught sight of Peter Marchant on the terrace, and the vague discomfort she had felt. A few moments ago she had reassured—almost laughed at her friend. Now, at the back of her mind, doubt and uneasiness were rampant.

Then a horrible thought came to her, that if there was anything in those rumours from Netherwood, it must be Nina Maynard who was the cause of them. She remembered the crowd at the "school-treat," and scoffed at the thought of any of them capturing Peter, except her, and it came to her how much they had been together that day, and also, for she was a shrewd observer in her human moments, their obvious *entente* the following day at Nina's own home. In London, too, she recollected with horror their meeting at her house, and how he had forgotten a pressing engagement in order to see her away. Also she remembered observing from her window, that instead of putting her into a taxi., as he had

told her he intended, they had certainly started to walk across the Park together. Putting all these things together, she acquired a panic worse than her friend's; and through it all came the unconquerable feeling, that it would have been better, so much better, if he had only met Nina first. We outsiders, if we have any human understanding, cannot help knowing when two kindred souls have met. But Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was conventional, hedged in by that thorny barrier of "what the world will say" as much as any of her set, and she understood with sympathetic clearness, the, to them, appalling consequences of an engagement broken off at the last moment.

Then, suddenly looking down into the Park, she saw Peter Marchant's lean figure unmistakably below her. Her heart gave a jump. He was in town then, and Mrs. Jimmy did not know it, had not seen him.

This was desperate. He was still coming towards her, and she could see his face plainly. He looked remarkably fit and well, and there was a firmness and elasticity about his step

that she had missed lately . . . also a new look of determination, gaiety almost, that she had never noticed before; she had somehow become accustomed to expect an amused cynicism.

There was a change in the mere looks of the man; obviously things were all right . . . or all wrong . . . all wrong. Somehow it augured the worst, the very worst. (Which at the bottom of her heart she knew to be the best.)

Then Mrs. Willoughby made a sudden and wild resolve. She looked at the clock; it was just lunch-time. At two-thirty she was due at Hurlingham for her great match. She paused desperately. Was it worth renunciation? The human side of her, buoyed by her worried thoughts, came uppermost.

Yes, it was.

She took the receiver off its rest, and called up the number of her godson's flat. They were such a time answering that the click of the croquet-balls in her mental ear was calling her to distraction. In a few moments her resolve would be broken down.

Then his man answered her.

"Please tell Mr. Marchant that Mrs. Willoughby-Lang is coming round to see him after lunch, and hopes that he will be in, as she is coming on very urgent business."

"Very good, ma'am."

It was done. Her wild resolve was taken. She must speak to him herself. For a few moments the mental click of the croquet-balls was maddening, but with a fine effort of will she banished them, and sat down to lunch.

CHAPTER XIII

TRAGEDY—AND THE CLICK OF THE GATE

PETER MARCHANT'S rooms were just those of a man who had done nothing very busily for the last ten years. He had an eye for old furniture, colour prints, and bronzes, and out of these three alone you can make a very nice bachelor's room. One side of the room was lined with book-shelves, well filled, most of the volumes showing signs of use.

(Don't you hate those glass-doored book-cases filled with aggressively nicely bound volumes, that stand smirking in even rows, as if they had been ordered by the dozen from a bookseller at wholesale prices? Were there no end of fine-sounding titles, and all of them by the most beloved authors, I could never bring myself to open those glass doors with

a little key, and take those uniformly bound books to my heart. They may stand there for ever as far as I am concerned, in their rows of red and green and amber leather respectability. Give me a few shelves of miscellaneous books, picked up here and there as the whim takes you . . . sixpenny paper-covers cheek by jowl with a priceless tome worth many guineas in binding alone, gold-tooled and vellum-covered. For in truth this should be no more dear to you than that shilling edition in Everyman's Library, wherein you may buy many a priceless gem which will bring more comfort and joy than all the leather bindings in the world. For it is the book itself that matters, and no author reads the better for a fine cover. Though, indeed, there be poems of certain writers that the publishers must perforce serve up in a dainty dish in order to make them at all palatable.)

Peter's books were characteristic of himself as his friends knew him, the diversity of them alone showing the wide range covered by his various whims at odd times in his life.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang never felt at all at home or happy in her godson's flat. Much as she liked him, she never admitted that she understood him, yet probably, at the bottom of her heart she did; for though Mrs. Willoughby was well shut in by that hedge of conventionality which Peter occasionally startled the nerves of his set by jumping, she sometimes peeped through crevices in that hedge herself, hence that understanding which was hers in her human moments.

Most people's rooms reveal more clearly than anything else their personality and character. Peter's always seemed to conceal his, and that is why it frightened Mrs. Willoughby-Lang. The few moments during which she waited for him that afternoon reduced her to such a state of nerves that she gained the courage of desperation, and greeted him smiling and at ease when he appeared.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Will," he said; "have you come to hear me my catechism?"

She clutched at this as a fine opening.

"Just exactly that, my dear Peter," she answered, allowing just a shade of seriousness to tinge her voice.

"But, good heavens, it's Saturday afternoon. Why aren't you at Hurlingham to meet the great champion, Mrs. Will? I believe he has frightened you at last."

"Peter, it's no use jesting, I've come here to be serious with you."

"Believe me, I never thought you came to frivol . . . two serious-minded people like ourselves . . . the idea of it."

"Peter, I must talk to you . . ."

"It's the catechism . . . I knew it . . . at least I don't know it . . . that is the trouble. . . . I'm learning it up for Sunday, to-morrow . . . let me off. . . ."

"What . . ."

"Don't . . . I've forgotten my name. Anyhow, I believe you had something to do with the choosing of it. . . ."

"Peter . . ." Mrs. Willoughby made a sudden desperate movement of appeal, out

of the depths of Peter's special arm-chair. "Peter, can't you see that I must have something very important to say, if I have come here and given up the great match—the match of the season—to talk to you?" Mrs. Willoughby was the personification of tragedy, and Peter was moved.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Will," he said simply; "whatever is it?"

"It's . . . about Muriel." Mrs. Willoughby looked up nervously to see if this affected him in any way. Peter never moved a muscle, but his face was grave.

"Yes," he said; "what about her?"

"And . . . and you. . . ."

"My dear Mrs. Will . . . what on earth . . . ?"

"You are thinking that it is fearful . . . cheek . . . on my part, Peter; really it is not . . . I hate doing it. But your dear mother was my greatest friend, and Mrs. Jimmy is my friend too . . . and, oh, I hate to see two young people . . . oh, Peter, I have the right to say this, have n't I?"

"Will you state the case against me?" said Peter quietly, with his whimsical smile.

"It's not exactly against you . . . but it is this. . . . Mrs. Jimmy came to see me this morning, and you will hardly believe me when I tell you that she was agitated . . . extraordinarily agitated. . . ."

"Mrs. Jimmy? Impossible. . . ."

"I knew you would n't believe it . . . but she was . . . Peter, you must understand . . ."

"May I smoke?" Peter lit a cigarette with deliberation. "Yes, Mrs. Will, I expect I understand," he said gently: "I had n't thought much of Mrs. Jimmy, I'm afraid. Did she ask you to come to me? . . ."

"No, not exactly . . . she did n't know you were in town. . . . It seems so extraordinary. . . . Peter, what are you playing at?"

Peter drew in a breath of smoke and puffed it out very slowly before he answered. It was most unexpected being brought to book by Mrs. Will like this. He hated it . . . it brought all the affair down to such a common level.

"I gather it is this," he said at last; "you women have such marvellous intuitions, that we poor fools of men, making our wise plans, are thrown entirely out of gear. You seem always to know things before we know them ourselves. Mrs. Jimmy has, I suppose, noticed that . . . there is . . . something . . . wrong between Muriel and me. . . ." He spoke slowly, hesitating for the right word.

"Oh, Peter . . . don't tell me it is true . . . you're not going to . . .?"

Peter turned to her suddenly, half smiling, in his whimsical way.

"I see it is not my catechism, but my confession, you want to hear."

"I thought . . . I hoped I might help . . . do something—you see, you are both my friends . . . it seems so dreadful. . . ."

"Mrs. Will, I know you are my friend. I know you mean awfully well about it. . . . I suppose I had better make a clean breast of it, though I know it is Muriel who should be told first. . . . I have been there already,

but they were all out . . . I am to go this evening. . . . But you're safe to tell . . . you were always so good to me when I did n't deserve it. . . ."

"Tell me, Peter." There are few women who are not flattered by a direct appeal to their sympathies. Mrs. Willoughby lost her nervousness, forgot her croquet, and grew alert, human, and understanding.

"Of course I am to blame. I've been an utter blackguard, I suppose you will say, but all men are fools till they learn the one great secret. . . ."

"The one great secret?" This new Peter bewildered her, but somehow she felt more at home with him than with the cynical, easy, amusing Peter of old times.

"Mrs. Will," Peter threw the rest of his cigarette viciously into the grate, "there is only one thing to learn in life that is important. . . . I . . . I suppose women know it all along, but it takes us men the deuce of a time to find out—and then it's usually too late—anyway too late to save us from our

folly. . . . Of course I've been a fool . . .” he added.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang, groping through this speech in utter darkness, here thought she saw light, and steered for it.

“My dear boy,” she said uncomfortably, “don't let that worry you. . . . Muriel is very fond of you . . . I'm sure she'll forgive you anything . . . if she must hear about it at all.”

It was Peter's turn to grope in the dark.

“Muriel?” he said, bewildered; “oh, I see . . .” the old cynical smile twisted his thin lips. “No, I've not been that particular kind of idiot . . . it's over Muriel that I've been such a cursed fool.”

“You mean?” Mrs. Willoughby played with her chain miserably.

Peter leaned back in his chair.

“I should never have got engaged to her,” he said, abruptly. “I did n't love her . . . never thought I did . . . I did n't know it mattered then . . . I had n't learnt the great secret, you see.”

He looked past Mrs. Willoughby-Lang's comfortable, well-preserved figure, past the bachelor room with its atmosphere of leather and smoke . . . past the London street and the houses opposite with their unblinking, solid, soulless windows—into a garden full of colour and form and scent, half-way up a hill looking south, and backed by heavy-leaved beechwoods, and a little green gate leading thereto . . . and he was silent.

"And now?" asked Mrs. Willoughby timidly, at last.

"I have learnt," he said quietly.

Then Mrs. Willoughby understood, and knew that her worst fears were realised.

"Poor Muriel . . . poor little girl."

Peter looked up at her quickly, curiously.

"Muriel will not suffer more than a few days . . . even that she herself will not feel—she does not care a rap about me," he said.

Then he remembered when he had used those words before, and the smell of the beechwoods came back to him, and the soft

scrunch of the moss underfoot, and the divine presence of the One Woman. It surged over his sense, blinding, deafening him to all else. There was a pause.

"But, Peter . . . forgive me, please . . . I feel like a horrid old woman-inquisitor . . . Peter, are you being quite . . . straight about it? . . ."

"I am being as straight as I can," he answered quaintly. "I never knew or realised anything till the end of last week. When I did, I went back to Netherwood to try and push it all behind me, away from me . . . and act square by Muriel. I tried it . . . that week-end. It was awful . . . ghastly . . . a farce . . . it was n't fair or square . . . I . . . could n't stick it. But I thought I would give myself one more chance. I went right away by myself . . . away from them all, into another sort of life—a healthy, clean sort of life, in which one could think sanely. And it came to me there quite clearly the one and only thing to be done . . . so I came up to-day to do it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Give Muriel her chance of chucking me," he said quietly. "I am going to her this evening. . . ."

"But, Peter, if she does n't . . . if she won't? . . ."

"Muriel does n't care a rap about me."

"But think of the worry of it all—all the preparations and presents . . . think of the trousseau. . . ."

"Mrs. Will," he said, smiling gravely, "you can't expect a man to understand how a few frocks . . . and . . . and undergarments can stand in the way of three people's sane and healthy happiness."

Mrs. Willoughby sank back helplessly into the depths of her chair.

Peter leaned forward.

"Mrs. Will," he said slowly, "I spoke just now of the one great secret worth learning. It is this. That if one wants to get the best out of life, to, well . . . to do anything . . . to . . . er . . . leave life without regrets . . . and all that . . . one must find the one

woman in the world and marry her . . . nothing else matters a straw. . . .”

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was silent.

“You must admit that?”

The poor woman was up against one of those simple deep matters which her set was not given to considering. It was very trying and perplexing to her.

“Granted you are right,” she said at last, “what about Muriel? supposing she . . . loves you?”

Peter laughed, a little cynically. He had no illusions now.

“Honestly, do you think she does?”

Mrs. Willoughby remembered forcibly that scene after dinner at Netherwood, when Peter had stood outside on the terrace, and Muriel had sat within, absorbed in her Bridge . . . she wavered.

“She is very young, hardly awake,” she temporised.

“She does n’t know what love means. To her getting married means getting a lot of fuss made over her, and a lot of new clothes,

and presents, and things. One of the ordinary excitements of being 'out,' like being presented at court."

"Supposing it's more than that to her?"

"Then Heaven help me," said Peter.

"But it can't be. . . ."

Suddenly the telephone bell on his table rang sharply, startling the stillness of the room.

With a word of excuse Peter went to it.

"Yes . . . yes . . . this is Mr. Marchant speaking . . . who is it? Grosvenor Gardens? yes . . . Doctor who? oh, yes . . . what is it?"

Then a long silence, broken by stifled exclamations from Peter.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang turned unconsciously as if to hear what had happened. She saw him listening with a face of frozen horror to the speaker at the other end.

A few quick questions were rapped out—"When did it happen? . . . Who is there now? . . . Does Mrs. Brackenridge know?"—to which the replies were of course inaudible.

Then, "Yes, of course, I'll come at once." And Peter hung up the receiver, turning to Mrs. Willoughby with a face that looked suddenly haggard and old.

"It's Jimmy," he said, "Jimmy Brackenridge . . . my God! it's too awful. . . ."

"What? What has happened? For Heaven's sake tell me. . . ."

Peter stood rigidly by the table, trying to take it in.

"They have found him . . . shot . . . in the study. . . ."

"Dead?" The horror on Peter's face was reflected on hers.

He nodded. "Poor chap . . . poor Jimmy. . . ."

"Not . . . oh . . . himself?"

"There seems no doubt about it . . . my God! . . . it's too awful. . . ."

They were silent a few minutes. Then Peter raised his head.

"I must go to them," he said simply.

Mrs. Willoughby looked straight into his face . . . at his eyes. She saw there the dull

hopelessness of a man who hears the prison gates clang behind him.

He answered the question in her look as if she had spoken.

"I don't know . . ." he said. "It seems out of my hands now."

"It's too awful . . . poor, poor Jimmy. What could have made him?"

"I don't know . . . I must go to them. . . ."

He tried to collect himself.

"My brougham will take you there . . . it is quicker than a taxi."

"But you . . . what will you do?"

"I will walk home through the park. . . . I would rather. . . ."

They went out together.

As in a nightmare, Peter found himself whizzed powerlessly to Grosvenor Gardens. A thousand thoughts were whirling through his mind . . . the small unnecessary thoughts that follow on some great shock. Above all, and through all, the thought of Nina hammered at his brain, the longing to be away from this new and awful tangle of his affairs

... away from it all ... never to have known it
... to be quietly in her garden on the hill
digging in the soil. ... He revolted at him-
self, but could think of nothing else. Again
and again he tried to bring his mind to bear
on the awful tragedy that had fallen so
suddenly upon his betrothed.

Then, blinding him, came the thought of
Muriel, and what he had come up to town
to tell her. ...

The brougham reached the door—the blinds
were down, pulled hastily by dazed servants,
who found some sort of refuge in doing what
they could.

Peter, with a tremendous effort of will,
nerved himself up to his task.

.

Quarter of an hour later, he and the doctor
softly shut the study door behind them.
Williams, the old butler, pale and shaky, was
waiting for them in the hall.

“Miss Muriel, sir, is in the morning-room
upstairs . . .” he said to Peter. “She said
I was to tell you, sir.”

"Thanks, Williams, I'll go up." Peter's voice was low and mechanical. In the face of such a calamity as poor Jimmy's death, all other affairs in the world seemed far away, difficult to recall. He went up slowly, wondering with vague distrust how Muriel was taking it. . . . He had never noticed that she was very devoted to either of her parents, but such a thing as this must be terrible for any child to bear.

He opened the door, calling her name softly.

The room was so dark with its drawn blinds that for a moment he could see nothing. Then a crumpled heap in a corner moved convulsively. Stung with pity, and unnerved, he took two quick steps towards her with hands outstretched. . . .

Suddenly she was in his arms, clinging to him passionately, as though she would never let him go.

"Peter, Peter . . . thank God you have come to me, Peter. . . ."

He bent over her, touching her forehead

with his lips, comforting her as one would a child. But there was nothing of the child in her passionate clinging, and suddenly surging into his mind, this came home to Peter. It was no child's terrified face that he looked down into, but a woman's. And she clung to him, her lover, as to her one stay in a whirlwind of space.

Could he fail her?

Suddenly it seemed to him that he heard the sharp clang of a gate. . . . He knew it to be the shutting-to of the little green gate that led to the garden on the hill—and he was left on the other side, shut out of it for ever.

He drew Muriel closer to him, and she, hiding her face on his breast, heard nothing of the click of the gate. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

THE LETTER

TO the Littleborough neighbourhood, the appalling news of Jimmy Brackenridge's death came as a terrible shock. That he should die at all seemed out of place, that he should die so suddenly a mystery . . . something over which eyebrows were lifted.

Then it came out, all the sordid story. It was the story of a fool, nothing more, but these stories make the saddest reading in the world. The countryside forgot the tragedy of it in the excitement it created, and even felt a kind of importance in belonging to a neighbourhood which figured for the moment so largely in the papers. You see, no one had known the Brackenridges very well—the yearly “school-treat” and for a few houses an occasional dinner, was the sum of their in-

timacy. The Brackenridges' friends were not their neighbours, therefore these folk felt a peculiar enjoyment in discussing the whole affair in all its details. It was indeed something to talk about at last. Mrs. Vicar, somehow, heard the news first, and she flew across the fields that morning to Appledene, and found Mrs. Admiral helping the house parlour-maid to clean the silver.

The poor lady was in a great scurry to remove all traces of her occupation (Heaven knows why, but there are thousands of nice women who think it a calamity to be caught, even by their friends, in an apron, duster in hand, in the morning), but the importance of Mrs. Vicar's manner bustling up the little drive, as seen from the pantry window, proved too much for her and the pink powder was still in evidence as she effusively greeted her friend in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Vicar was still panting.

"My dear, have you heard?" was all she could gasp out. "Terrible thing, terrible thing. . . ."

Mrs. Admiral had not. She almost shivered with excitement.

"Poor Mrs. Brackenridge . . . but there . . . there was always something . . . something about him. . . ."

"What has happened? . . . I've heard nothing . . . Charles is always so stupid about bringing me news . . . do tell me. . . ."

"Mr. Brackenridge . . ."

"What? Run off?" Mrs. Vicar, overcome with the importance of her news, shook her head.

"Dead?" It was characteristic of the Littleborough gossips to put the worse calamity first.

"Yes—shot himself."

"No."

"Yes."

"How dreadful for her . . . how dreadful for all of us! My dear, how do you know? Why?"

The Vicar's mother told all she knew, and her version was sketchy, but crude.

They were still speaking of it an hour later, when the Admiral came in, having met Colonel Maynard outside. . . . Both had heard, with more details of the financial smash, which appeared to be very complete.

"Shocking affair, this, Mrs. Stodart . . . shocking affair," said the Colonel. "Must say, I never cared for Brackenridge much, but I did n't expect this of him . . . 'pon my word, I did n't. . . . Terrible affair. Sort of thing one does n't expect of a gentleman."

"Can't think what the world's coming to," platitudinised the old Admiral. "I don't remember these things happening in my young days. It's this confounded finance business; the fellows can't keep away from it. . . . Don't know what you can expect with the present Government. . . ."

The Admiral's remark may appear to you to be irrelevant of Jimmy Brackenridge's death, but he said it in all good faith, and in such I write it down. It was in a way a stock phrase with him, but then all his conversation was a collection of stock phrases.

He seldom evolved a new one, and this one concerning the Government applied equally to whatever party ruled, though he was, like the whole neighbourhood, a staunch Conservative, and discussed politics at length with his fellow-dodderers, as such will, in relation only to such petty matters as touched their immediate interest.

Jimmy Brackenridge's story was very simple. Very comfortable means to start with—enough to keep Netherwood and the town house, as his father had before him, with good allowances for his wife and two children. But gradually, under Mrs. Jimmy's placid, self-satisfied management, the expenditure had increased. He was a man like a million others, who hated bothers and domestic fuss, indolent and kind-hearted, and whatever Mrs. Jimmy had, in her artless way, proved to him was necessary, he gave her. A long season in the town house when Muriel came out seemed to be essential, an overwhelming number of frocks and dressmaker's bills followed. It seemed impossible to get on with-

out several motors, and no use getting them cheap. Entertaining, too, Mrs. Jimmy was rather adept at, and of course he saw that if you entertain, you must do it well. He could n't bear the bother of going into his expenditure, but when at last compelled to do so, he only made the most feeble efforts to restrain it. "I suppose it will come all right soon, eh?" he would say to his business man, who would reply gravely that something should be done to help it. "Of course it must . . . of course . . . er . . . I'll see to it at once," would be his answer; but he could not face Mrs. Jimmy, and the row there would be.

Then there had come to him the idea of making money—other chaps had done it, why should n't he? He went to a man he knew who was "in the city," a friend of young Paul Renton's, and he went to the wrong man. I am still certain that Jimmy never knew exactly when he had started on a career of fraud. That is what it came to in the end. At first it seemed so fatally easy to make money. It

rolled in, but acting under advice he did not use it to pay bills therewith, but left it to make more. I do not think he understood anything about the business, till one day he discovered he had been the moving spirit of a gigantic fraud . . . a fraud threatened with exposure, which meant ruin, disgrace, and possibly imprisonment. Then he seemed to have woken up. He strained every nerve to avert the catastrophe. He thought of nothing else for three weeks. Thousands of poor folk were involved . . . he had ruined them. That from the first, for he was a good-hearted sort, poor Jimmy, was the worst horror to him. His personal disgrace came home to him gradually. Then at last there hammered at his brain the awful fact that he must face his wife and his world, and tell them. . . . It was the crux, the snapping point. He could not do it. . . .

They said at the inquest, "of unsound mind," but I do not see why they brought in insanity. I truly believe that he simply preferred to face the unknown than the

known, the vague certainty of death, rather than the placid, smiling self-satisfaction of his wife.

So the end came that Saturday afternoon, and the evening papers were ringing with it, and his friends, horrified, wondered. On Monday morning the papers printed curt, tentative announcements of a gigantic fraud, in which Jimmy Brackenridge's name figured prominently, and their worst fears were realised. By noon the evening editions flared with it, the suicide adding piquancy to their crude, uncompromising statements.

Then came another piece of news, leaking out from somewhere. Jimmy Brackenridge had left a letter directing every ounce of his estate to be realised for the benefit of the defrauded shareholders. It was here that some of his friends thought that the coroner's verdict "of unsound mind" was justified, for the letter cancelled all previous wills, and made no mention of wife and family. Whatever would have been left of the wreck of the estate was now gone, nothing remaining

but a few hundreds a year of Mrs. Jimmy's own.

All these details filtered gradually through to the countryside, and were discussed, enlarged, and commented on for many a long day.

To Nina, from the morning when the Colonel, coming back from the Admiral's, had told her, crudely, throughout the week, life had become blank with hopelessness. She had no word from Peter, but it was not necessary between them. She knew that he was with Muriel, that was all. There was no jealousy in her heart, only a great pity for the poor child, so utterly crushed by fate, and there came to her also a strange detached gladness that Peter was with the child to comfort her. She knew what it might mean now, to have at hand one human soul to turn to, in a world of incomprehensibility.

What would happen in the end?

She thought somehow that one day he would just come down the forest path, and she, hearing the click of the little green gate,

would look up and see him there, as she had seen him that first summer day.

Day by day she went up into her garden, working and waiting, with the one thought, "He may come to-day." Evening after evening she came and sat reading in the drawing-room, while the Colonel played his game of Patience, and always her one thought was, "He may come to-morrow."

Then she thought he would write. To her patient waiting she added that of looking, morning and afternoon, for the postman. And that is the most wearying waiting of all. It is extraordinary how many other letters always come, how trivial they always are; but even they are better than to see the postman trudge past the house without so much as looking at it. . . . That is worst of all.

At last he wrote.

She saw the letter lying on the hall table as she came in from a duty drive with the Colonel. She had never seen his writing before, but knew it at once. She took up the envelope quietly and looked at the postmark,

then went leisurely over to the rack and hung up her dust-coat, came back and picked up some visiting cards lying there, reading them slowly. By this time the Colonel came fussing in.

"Any letters?" he asked.

"Only one, for me."

Only one . . . the letter of her life.

"Dear me . . . can't think why those fellows don't answer my letter." He was expecting a communication concerning the carriage of his greenhouse, for which he believed he had paid one-and-ninepence too much.

"Very trying, Daddy, isn't it?" Her voice was cool and level as ever. "The Johnsons have called when we were out."

"H'm . . . not sorry to miss them. Can't stand Mrs. Johnson . . . silly woman."

"Yes, she is rather. Shall we have tea in?" She rang the bell.

"Well, I might as well have a cup, the roads are so confoundedly dusty."

"Tea, please, Alice."

And still the letter burnt in her fingers. She quietly put it aside, and took off her gloves. There was plenty of time to read it before tea even in the privacy of her room.

But that is just a woman's way. She will look for days and weeks for the one letter, wearing herself and the postman out, yet when it comes she will let it stay hours in her pocket or bag without opening it, while a hundred trivial things claim her attention.

I think it is because when the great things of life come close to us, they appear so overwhelming to our shivering little souls, that we cling to these trivialities, as familiar friends, till we have found our balance in the universe again. Thank God, I say again, for trivialities.

Then, after tea, Nina walked slowly up the pergola path, and at last dared to think.

Would it say, "I am coming to you tomorrow?" No . . . he would have wired that . . . or why wire? If he had been coming . . . at all . . . he would not have written, he would have just come down the

woodland path, and through the little green gate. . . .

Then he was not coming . . . she knew it now before she opened the letter. That was his decision, then.

She opened it at last in her own garden, among the flowers, and read it very quietly.

“ . . . You will understand . . . it is out of our hands now. . . . ” So it began. Her eyes seemed to grow fixed on that line—the rest of the letter hardly seemed to matter. He told of that night, down on the Sussex mud, when the knowledge had come to him that love was the one thing in the world . . . when he had felt her calling to him and he had answered gladly, the song of life singing in his veins . . . told her of the next day, of the great shock of Jimmy’s death . . . and then of Muriel. . . . “ I saw then that what had been a small matter to me . . . no . . . I can’t say that . . . God knows what it was to me . . . I was just asleep in the dark . . . but I had been utterly wrong about her. She was no mere butterfly, but a woman with a

soul—and she loved me—God knows why—I never dreamed of it . . . but it alters everything, does n't it? . . . Perhaps I am a coward not to take our happiness between our hands and let all the rest go to the winds . . . well, you must think of me as a coward then. I cannot fling her back on the world, penniless as she is, and in the face of all this disgrace. It has come to me that every one has a bit to do sometime in life, and this seems to be my bit, and I must do it as well as I can. . . .

“As for you . . . I can't write, I can't think. . . . What I have made you suffer for my cursed selfishness. . . . It is that which tortures me every hour of the day and night. . . .

“There is only one thing to be done . . . we must never see each other again. That way only lies faithfulness. . . .

“Will you write to me once, though? I am strong enough to let it go at this, if you would rather not. But to know that you understand . . . understand . . . that is all.

But you will understand, I know, woman of the brown earth and the flowers. . . .”

Nina read it slowly through once; she took it all in quietly. It sank deep down into her soul . . . and he was right.

She understood.

The evening drew in, golden and mellow, like every evening of that wonderful summer. The sun caught the beech-trees of the forest, setting them on fire.

In the garden, it was the reign of the yellow sunflowers, and they made in the intense sunset a wonderful blaze of gold; the stocks had finished flowering, and the tobacco plants grown tall and straggly, but were still sweet in the evening. The scent came to her now, but she did not heed it, any more than she saw the wonderful fire-flames in the forest. She heeded nothing, and the flowers had no message for her. Gradually it came home to her.

She would never see him again. She had waited in her garden for his footsteps down the little forest path, for the click of the green

gate. She would never hear it now. Her waiting was over.

She slipped on to her knees beside the flowers, and dug her hands into the soft brown earth. Her head bent over the flowers; unconsciously she strove to wrest from them comfort and strength and peace. . . . There was none.

Very slowly the tears came into her eyes and fell, hurting her as they came; for she was a woman unaccustomed to crying, and for years she had known no real sorrow. She let them fall, for all their agony, for she knew that they were of the simple primitive things of life.

Suddenly she heard her father call her from the lower garden.

She rose slowly, brushing the tears away, checking them somehow.

"Coming, Daddy"; her voice was quiet, usual, placid.

She took the letter, hesitated, then holding it still in her hand, went down the garden path.

That was the end, then.

As she went it seemed to her that far down the path a little shadowy blue-pinafores child was looking sorrowfully at her. She remembered Maeterlinck's blue children, who were waiting to be born . . . and her lips smiled very tenderly. . . .

One more dream was laid to rest.

CHAPTER XV

TEA WITH THE SPARROWS

MRS. WILLOUGHBY - LANG was troubled. The tragedy that had fallen upon her friends touched her acutely, as much for the Brackenridges themselves as for Peter, seeing that it was the off-season for croquet. Every one had left town, and she could no longer get good games at Hurlingham or Ranelagh. She paid a few visits, but found that she was off her game, and visiting without croquet drove her mad. She wriggled out of the others, and returned to her flat in town. But she was restless, found it too hot, and felt she must leave.

Then one day when she was acutely miserable, she met Peter in Kensington Gardens.

"What . . . still in town?" was her greeting.

"Yes, you see there is still a lot to do."

She looked at him sympathetically, knowing that he had taken the burden of Jimmy's affairs on his shoulders.

"Tell me—how are they?"

Peter made a gesture of despair.

"How he is changed," was Mrs. Wiloughby's one thought, looking at him. She remembered the half-cynical, whimsical Peter who had both amused and frightened her in the old days, and could see nothing left of him. All that was left was the thin quaint smile, and there was only the ghost of this. Instead there was just an intensely human man, who had looked into the depths of life, and found much therein.

"But I thought you had left, Mrs. Will?"

"I did leave. I went on three visits, but I was clean off my game. At each I grew worse and worse; I couldn't hit a ball—literally. Why even that abominable young Mrs. Renton beat me hollow. . . . Oh, it was

awful. . . . I gave it up, and came back here. . . . My nerve is all to pieces."

"Is n't even Haeckel any good?"

"Haeckel? Don't talk of him. . . . I am beginning to understand him. . . ."

"Good heavens! . . . that's an awful calamity."

"Yes, I've thrown the book away—it's no longer any good."

"Of course not."

They were walking slowly down the flower-walk.

Suddenly she turned to him impulsively.

"Peter . . . what are you going to do?"

There was a long silence. Then he spoke carelessly.

"There is only one thing to be done."

"But all you said that day . . . about . . . about . . . the one thing in the world?"

Again a silence. And again carelessly.

"It's all right in theory."

"Peter . . ."

"But it does n't always come off. . . ."

Then she looked at him, and from his im-

penetrable face, knew that the carelessness was the outcome of great agony. . . .

"But . . . Peter . . . the other woman . . . haven't you got to think of her?" She knew, instinctively, that her questions were torture to him, yet from the sympathy in her own mind, she could not forbear to ask.

"For some inscrutable reason, human nature has decided that the strongest must go to the wall, according to our code."

"The strongest?"

"Think it out; . . . you will find I am right. . . ."

Two babies ran suddenly into them with their hoops. Peter extricated them gravely.

"And you?"

"I don't count. I was a fool . . . I must pay for my folly."

"Peter . . . won't it be too big a bill?"

"I shall meet it somehow."

"Does . . . she . . . know?"

"Good Lord, no." He turned to her with a face of horror.

"She will guess."

"She must never guess. She will be my wife by Christmas." His voice was very low. They walked on for some time in silence.

Suddenly he turned to her with his whimsical smile.

"Come and have tea with the sparrows."

"Have you nothing else to do?"

"Yes, a hundred things. I know you have n't."

"Nothing much. I am too restless and nervy to do anything."

"You ought n't to stay in town in this heat."

"I know I ought not to, but where can I go? . . . I can't bear hotels, and I dare n't go on visits because I'm off my game, and I'm never asked anywhere where they don't play croquet."

Peter was silent. He was thinking what a lot of life was mere futility, and his godmother seemed to him to be an infinitely pathetic figure (she would have been surprised if she had known it), a wandering, feckless soul, with a long life of experience behind her, and

little to look forward to, and little gained thereby. She had had two husbands without, so far as he knew, learning the meaning of love; and she had no children, no special province, no work in life, nothing but this croquet . . . that torturing demon, who alternately flattered and repulsed her . . . a hateful master. Yet he recognised the strong human sympathy that was in her, and came uppermost when her demon was tired, her saving grace.

They sat under the trees, and thousands of sparrows came and hopped about them, charming, irresponsible people, and the big clumsy pigeons too, all fighting for the crumbs. Wise people, these flutterers, knowing more than they say, yet saying much, after their own fashion. What do they remember, I wonder, of the free life of the fields that they have never known? Some vague inkling, perhaps . . . transmitted through many generations of wee brown babies . . . whispered sometimes on spring evenings when everything that has breath feels the desire of the wild.

It was then that sudden idea occurred to Mrs. Willoughby-Lang. Although Peter had never told her the name of that other woman, she had never doubted for a moment. And she remembered now her old friend, the Colonel, and his warm invitation to her to stay with them. Perhaps she could, after all, be of some use to some one. She talked trivially for a few moments, making up her mind.

Then, suddenly it was made up for her.

Peter, putting his cup down on the table, looking steadily across at her, said:

“Do you remember the Maynards down at Littleborough?”

Mrs. Willoughby, caught, so to speak, on the hop, started.

“I was just thinking of them,” she said, helplessly.

“Were you? It must have been a brain-wave then. I was wondering why you don’t run down and look them up. There’s no croquet there.”

Perhaps his voice was a little too cool, too

careless. . . . Anyhow, this left no doubt in Mrs. Willoughby's mind.

"I should probably like it very much. . . . I wonder if they are at home now?"

This was a trap, and Peter knew it.

"I don't think they go away much," he said.

"Well, I might write to them."

"Yes, do," said Peter, casually, and the conversation dropped. But it left Peter burning all over, from the mere fact of having mentioned the name . . . burning with longing for the coolness of the garden he might never walk in again, for the sight of the face that he dared not see, even in his dreams. He grew restless, his talk with Mrs. Willoughby-Lang desultory, difficult, and she from the depths of her human sympathy understood.

Would she dare to sympathise? . . . Could she do anything? . . . She was an impulsive woman, who usually checked her impulses and immediately regretted that she had done so. This time she let it have its way.

They had finished their tea, and were strolling back towards her flat.

"Peter," she said, a little breathlessly, "I understand . . . about . . . Nina Maynard. . . . Can I . . . is there anything I can do?"

There was a long pause as they walked slowly on.

"How did you know?" he said, at last.

"Oh, I don't know. . . . I half guessed . . . and then I heard sort of rumours. . . . My dear boy, somehow a woman always knows . . . these things. . . ."

"You don't mean . . . there could have been . . . no talk . . . about her . . . and me?"

"Well, not exactly. . . . Mrs. Jimmy had heard something. . . . I told you that day . . ."

"Not that . . . My God! . . . what a fool's mess I have made of things. . . ."

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was miserable.

"My dear, it is not so much you, as fate . . . and carelessness. . . ."

"Carelessness?"

"Yes . . . I must call it that . . . it's what so many men spoil their own lives and some woman's with. . . ." This was one of Mrs. Willoughby's flashes of shrewdness. Her demon was having a good rest. "It was—was n't it?—just from sheer carelessness that you got engaged to Muriel."

"Heaven knows. . . I suppose you might call it carelessness. It is extraordinary to me to think how I did it . . . now . . ." he said gently. "But it is the most extraordinary thing of all to think . . ."

"What?"

"That . . . that . . . she wants me . . ." He spoke very awkwardly, with infinite tenderness in his voice.

"Trouble," said Mrs. Willoughby-Lang, "acts so differently on us all. It makes some characters and utterly mars others. It may make Muriel's."

"It is all the same anyhow," said Peter, with the old hopelessness in his voice. "All I pray is . . . that she will never guess."

"Have you seen . . . Nina . . . since?"

"No."

"Written?" She hated asking, but guessed that it would do him good to talk it out.

"Oh, yes . . . once."

"She understood?"

"God knows . . . she never answered."

"I'll go to her, Peter."

He looked at her, his brows knitted, his lips pressed tight, but hope in his eyes.

"I'll go to her," said Mrs. Willoughby again, and her voice shook a little.

"Yes . . . go to her," he said, in a low hard voice. "Ask her to see me again, once. . . . I said not in my letter—but I must. I can't go on till I have. . . . Make her see me."

They reached Mrs. Willoughby's door in silence. Then he held out his hand to her—a little twisted smile on his face.

"Make her see me," he said again.

"I will . . . I will do my utmost. . . . It would be best not, of course . . . but I understand."

"You are a good godmother," he said; "I

really think you do more than you promised and vowed for me."

"My dear boy," she said, a little wistfully, "what have I done all my life for anybody?"

Certainly her Fiend was having a holiday.

Peter went back to the Grosvenor Gardens house. Mrs. Jimmy had been utterly prostrated by the shock of her husband's suicide, and refused to be moved. Now, after four weeks, she was slowly recovering—but still insisted that she was not fit to undertake anything like a move. There were those who were unkind enough to say that Mrs. Jimmy clung to her comforts as long as possible, and hints were heard of certainly sufficient recovery within the week to take a lively interest in the shoals of deep mourning that were arriving daily. As to the truth of that, what, after all, would be more natural and human than for a woman without much soul or stamina, brought up all her life in comfortable solid luxury, to shrink from facing a world of poverty and small rooms? Truly, there were many friends who warm-heartedly opened

their doors to her—thank Heaven there are always some such kindly folk on our visiting list—but the mainstay of Mrs. Jimmy's life was her self-complacency, and this had received a terrible shock. It was not broken—merely bent, but the bending nearly killed her when she allowed herself to think of it, which was not very often. Like the worldly-wise woman that she was, she filled her mind with other things, chiefly the choosing of clothes for herself and Muriel—Heaven alone knew who was going to pay for them—and left all business matters in the hands of Peter, and James, who had, of course, immediately resigned his commission, and was proving himself very painstaking, but utterly imbecile over the business, and was quite incapable of understanding the seriousness of his father's fraud. "Poor old Dad, he did make a mess of things," was his chief comment.

It was in Peter, therefore, that Mrs. Jimmy found her chief consolation. The extraordinary relief with which she welcomed the apparent proof that her fears were unfounded,

that Peter had never dreamed of breaking off his engagement with Muriel, certainly lightened the shock of her husband's death. I do not think she ever understood fully, certainly never realised the terrible disgrace that had fallen on the family. Her mind, wrapped as it had been for years in self-complacency, utterly refused to take it in. The letter in which Jimmy had directed everything to be sold, unproviding for her, had sunk much deeper in, but by the time they broke this to her she had already reached a degree of self-pity in which all regret for her husband was lost. The intense foolishness of poor Jimmy was all that impressed her of this.

Then, gradually, it dawned on her, forced home rather crudely by Muriel. The London house must be sold, and all the Netherwood property—neither were settled on her, or entailed. She could never entertain any more, or take her place in society.

Then it was that her first thought had been of Peter. Would he be likely to marry Muriel now, in the face of this appalling dis-

aster? Of course not, she thought at first, and this, more than anything, drove her to the verge of insanity. Then gradually it dawned, even on her obtuse mind, that Peter would.

"Fix a date for the wedding," she would urge Muriel again and again, while lying apparently prostrate on her sofa. "Nail him down to a day. . . . Of course there will be no one there but ourselves . . . just the immediate family. . . . It is a great, great trial after all my arrangements . . . but it must be so . . . only get it over soon. . . ."

And Muriel, while agreeing with her heartily, could not get over a feeling of disgust.

The tragedy of Jimmy's death had terrified the poor child. Her butterfly mind had been nearly overturned by it.

Then Peter had come . . . Peter with arms held out to her . . . not the Peter of the last month or two (for women's intuitions work at lightning speed, and they can detect a change in the cleverest of men before they have opened their mouths to speak) . . . not

quite the old Peter either, with his cynicism and whimsical love-making. It was a new Peter that had come to her that terrible afternoon, a man infinitely tender, human, and understanding. It was no wonder that the poor, terrified little one clung to him, showing him the whole of her naked soul . . . the one thing that he had never dreamed of her possessing. And the infinite joy it had been to lay her fears at rest . . . to be sure of him. So to her also the shock of her father's death and disgrace became as a bad dream, a nightmare to be thrust away from the mind.

All this in the first few weeks, when everything was chaos. Then her true self pushed its way uppermost once more, and, cool and calculating, began to realise what the disgrace meant to her. . . .

It is difficult to say who thought of it first, herself or her mother . . . perhaps the idea occurred simultaneously. For the London house they did not care . . . it was too full of the horror of the last few weeks. But Netherwood. It was intolerable that Nether-

wood should be sold. There had been Brackenridges there for centuries. It had always been their home. Yet it was to come under the hammer unless it was disposed of privately next month.

Anyhow, it was Muriel who first propounded it, which she did carelessly, almost childishly.

It was that evening when Peter returned from his talk with Mrs. Willoughby-Lang, returned on the edge of his nerves, tortured with anxiety, in a fever from the simple fact that he had spoken of the One Woman to one who knew her.

They were in Mrs. Jimmy's boudoir, Peter lying back in an arm-chair, and Muriel had come and sat on a stool at his feet, resting her head on his knee. She had developed these quaint little childish ways lately, which added to Peter's torture. Mrs. Jimmy lay on her sofa, as usual.

"Peter," said Muriel suddenly, in the stillness of the room, "when we are married, what home are we going to have?"

He laid his hand on her soft hair, as he would have on a child's.

"Where would you like to be, Moonie?"

Possibly this was art, possibly natural, but she answered.

"I don't mind so long as you are there."

"I still thought of buying that place in Kent we liked."

"Peter, it's very large."

"Not much bigger than Netherwood."

"Peter, darling . . . why not buy Netherwood?"

Did she feel the kind hand stroking her hair grow suddenly rigid? Did she feel the shiver that ran through the man's whole body? I do not know. It may be so, but she was young, very young, and very self-centred. At last he found voice.

"Moonie, would you care for it? you would n't, would you?" His voice was almost appealing. Did she notice it? I do not know, but it raised a storm of passion in her.

"Yes, yes . . . of course I would. . . . I hate it to go. . . . I hate some one else to

have it. . . . It's ours . . . ours. . . . Don't let any one else have it."

She had turned swiftly round facing him, her arms across his knees.

He looked at her, but dared not meet her eyes. "Moonie . . . Mrs. Jimmy. . . ." He appealed to the prostrate figure on the sofa.

"Oh, mother would live with us, of course . . . it would be like her own . . . I could never manage a big place alone anyway, could I, mummie?"

Mrs. Jimmy beamed at her, with her blandest, most complacent air.

"I've brought her up very badly, Peter dear," she said; "she is nothing but a wilful child."

"But . . . Netherwood?" Peter could hardly take it in, in its full horror.

"Well, why not?" purred Mrs. Jimmy from the sofa. "It would, of course, be much cheaper for you than that place in Kent, and I should love to think of my little girl not turned out of her rightful home." Mrs. Jimmy's voice grew tearful.

"You always loved Netherwood, Peter, didn't you?" coaxed Muriel, "that's why I thought of it."

Oh, the nightmare of it. He had never thought of this. What could he do? He did not know how to refuse them, firstly for their own sakes, for it was only Peter's real and intense sympathy that carried him through his relations with them. But, secondly, if he refused, what reason could he give? He remembered Mrs. Willoughby's hint that Mrs. Jimmy had heard rumours. If he refused . . . she would remember them . . . and think . . . what if she ferreted it out? It came home to him what a cad he would feel.

The whole thing filled him with disgust. Quiescence was the simplest.

"I'll buy Netherwood," he said quietly, "if you want it."

For answer Muriel flung her arms about him with a cry of joy. On the sofa Mrs. Jimmy sank back with a little sigh that was almost a sob.

But Muriel's arms seemed to be a dead

weight about him. He put her gently from him, kissing her forehead lightly.

"I must go now, dear," he said, "I've got a lot to do."

Somehow, he found the door.

In the room behind him, Mrs. Jimmy and her daughter looked at each other and smiled.

"You are a good child, Moonie," purred her mother.

CHAPTER XVI

NINA RESOLVES

I AM not sure if there is any time in the year like early autumn; just that time when after the sultry or sodden days of summer, there comes a stillness in the air, a touch of frost at night, clearing away at the coming of early morning in a light mist, when the leaves are just turning from the full heavy green of July, that we are growing tired of, to a lighter shade, and so to a golden brown, branch by branch, till later they burst into a blaze of red flame, and strew a marvellous Turkey carpet on the ground beneath them. This should begin to happen late in September, and this year it was well up to time. In the upper garden of the White House, the place was aflame with Michaelmas daisies in

all their glorious mauves and purples; the yellow sunflowers were still showing well, and dahlias flung splashes of rich dark colour into the harmony. There had been a fortnight's solid rain which had washed the dust of summer from every leaf, and soaked into the ground in such a way that it would never really dry up till the first frosts came, which was no matter to grumble over for gardeners. But the sad part was that it had dashed the roses to pieces, and they would never proudly hold up their heads again. Of course the ramblers had lost their bloom long ago, and now, as you went up the pergola, instead of a mass of colour above your head there were sparkling drops everywhere, and little silver spider-webs, like the drapery of a girl's ball-dress. The still cool touch in the air was delicious, health-giving, inspiring.

The upper garden had lately yielded its silence to the unaccustomed sound of voices. Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was at the White House, and it was she who talked with Nina at her work.

Nina was glad of it. Her own silence was unbearable to her; the voices of the flowers hardly reached her, the song of the brown earth went almost unheeded. The whisper of the cool, still air, once a welcomed, kindly friend, had little meaning for her. She needed human companionship desperately; she had lived so much withdrawn into herself and her blessed garden, that she found no one to whom it was easy to turn. All her girlhood friends had married, and thereafter ceased to be the same thing to her, as every spinster knows. To her neighbours she had always been nice and friendly, but she was not of them, and their life of tittle-tattle and gossip and small things was not hers. Therefore Mrs. Willoughby, descending on the White House for a few days, full of sympathy and human understanding, her demon still on long holiday, had found the task of winning her confidence a simple one.

Coming down in the train, Mrs. Willoughby had had many misgivings, and one flash of illumination at the end. There was only one

way to win such a woman as Nina Maynard's confidence, and that was by absolute frankness.

Therefore, directly they were alone together after tea, she had spoken of the Brackenridges and Peter Marchant, saying that she had seen him in town lately, but not them yet. Then she went on very simply, and regardless of Nina's silence, to talk a lot of him—of how he was looking, and all the work he was doing for the Brackenridges. At last Nina too was drawn to speak of him, which she did quite ordinarily, though to her own mind she seemed to be hearing her voice merely, speaking somewhere in the distance, of one that is dead.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was an easy guest, though she seemed to come out of another world to the quiet household. She kept the Colonel continually amused by recalling their old times in Simla, chatting of many people and places, and hearing his old anecdotes, that she remembered thirty years ago. It was a never-failing source of conversation, and one in which Nina was not needed to join, for

which she was grateful. Her heart was on fire from the mere contact with one who knew so well the man she loved, who had seen him but last week, and she was one of those who seem to join in a conversation by the mere pretence of listening to it. After dinner, too, Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was not one of those for whom the hostess utters a prayer to the god in the clock, that he may hurry the hands a little and so bring possible bedtime nearer. She immediately discovered that she knew a two-pack Patience which the Colonel did not, and spent a long time demonstrating it, while Nina merely worked and joined in from time to time.

The Colonel was so pleased that he was on the point of offering to turn the tennis-lawn into a croquet ground if Mrs. Willoughby so wished.

It was the next morning that Mrs. Willoughby, insisting on Nina continuing her garden work, came into the upper garden with her crochet—she always kept a special piece for visiting, which was never finished

or likely to be—and sat watching her at work from the old bench at the end of the path.

She watched the younger woman closely, comparing her mentally with the little dainty butterfly, Muriel. She saw the sharp contrast, and wondered more than ever at Peter's carelessness, as she persistently called it. Here was the woman for him, of all others—with her quiet hands, her calm, self-contained face, gentleness, character. She admired Nina immensely, and a pang went through her as she thought of all that Peter was going to lose in life. She remembered with dismay, almost, how upset she had been when she had first thought that Peter was going to throw up Muriel for another woman. Shame went through her as she remembered, too, that she had tried to urge on him the terrible fuss it would make, the mistake it would be. What did such things matter, she realised slowly, compared to the big things of life? . . . She, too, had begun to understand the lesson Peter had learnt, while

digging potatoes in the Crab's sea-shore garden.

Was it irrefutable, she wondered, that decision of his . . . since poor Jimmy's death? She thought slowly, uncomfortably about it. Yes, Peter was right. She would hate him, she knew, if he had not stood by Muriel in her great trouble, and having done so, she knew also that there would be no other course open to him than to marry her. Nina must suffer, then, and Peter—oh, it was pitiable—must they?

Presently Nina came over to work by her, kneeling on the ground near, her quick firm hands planting out small seedlings for next year's flowering. They talked a little, and Mrs. Willoughby wondered at her placid, unruffled cheeriness; but she noticed also the black under her eyes and the little lines about her mouth.

Suddenly she felt she must speak, keep her promise to Peter somehow.

"My dear, I want to talk to you . . . rather intimately? Do you mind?"

"Of course, I don't. . . . May I go on working though?" . . . cool and placid, but the heart inside her beating furiously.

"It is about Peter Marchant."

Again, as before, Nina felt to her horror the slow flush creeping over her face at the mention of his name. She bent quickly over her planting to hide it, but Mrs. Willoughby had seen.

"Thank Heaven, that's more human," she thought with a sigh of relief.

"My dear, I know the story of you two . . ." said Mrs. Willoughby gently.

Nina raised her face from the flowers and looked at her, the whole story in her eyes, and dumb misery on her trembling mouth.

"You know . . ." she faltered out, utterly human, unmanned, taken by surprise.

"I know very little . . . but I don't want to know more. . . . I have come from Peter to you. . . ."

There was a long pause; Nina knelt, idle, her hands fallen helplessly before her.

"Tell me . . ." she said at last, in a low voice.

"He wants to see you . . . once."

"I can't . . . I can't . . ." burst from Nina, passionately.

"It would help him."

"It would kill me. . . . I'm only a woman . . . love is the whole of our life . . . how can I see him?"

"Would not . . . once . . . more help you too, by helping him?"

Silence, whilst Nina knelt there, very still.

"Love does n't kill, you know, my dear."

Nina's fingers dug suddenly into the earth, her body shook a little.

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang was acutely miserable. It is always painful, somehow, when one woman shows another how much she loves a man. There is an absolute lack of anything to say, unless the woman is very young, and needs comforting.

"He wants to know that you understand."

"Could n't he have known that without words? . . . What does one want words for?"

Mrs. Willoughby had one of her flashes of shrewdness.

"I think somehow . . . men are more . . . human . . . you know what I mean . . . intuitions are not so . . . so . . . solid to them as to us. They always want more."

Nina knelt on silently for a few moments, idle. Then quietly, as from habit, she went on with her planting-out. Very tenderly she handled the little plants, as if they were children of hers.

Then she spoke softly.

"You must forgive me, please. . . . Thank you so much for your message. . . . I know you will understand that I must have a little time to think it over . . . before answering."

The words sounded formal, but the voice was very gentle, very human. She worked away in silence, and Mrs. Willoughby, understanding, took up her crochet again. And the morning passed slowly on till at lunch-time they went quietly down the garden together. Nina had that rare gift of keeping her inner life so closely locked up and well

guarded, that she could, by sheer force of character, so draw in her emotions that nothing was left but the charming outer shell, sweet and friendly to all the world.

She drove Mrs. Willoughby-Lang out in the trap that afternoon, showing her the country round, and staying for tea with some mutual acquaintances some miles distant. Her gaiety and friendliness, the intense interest she took in the garden, astonished Mrs. Willoughby-Lang very much, when she remembered the broken-hearted woman in the garden of the morning. Yet she realised that all this was not put on—some society manner, forced out for the occasion; but her genuine self, apart from her inner life and soul, into which Peter alone had penetrated.

It was here, at the home of these mutual friends, that both Nina and Mrs. Willoughby heard for the first time of the buying of Netherwood Hall. What some one said, in a pause of the conversation, was:

“So, after all, we are still going to have the Brackenridges at Netherwood.”

Mrs. Willoughby-Lang jumped round.

"Indeed?" she said, and looked uncomfortably across at Nina, to see if she had heard.

She had. She leaned forward, with an expression of interest.

"Is n't it to be sold, then?" she asked. "We had n't heard."

"Oh, yes, it must be sold, you know, of course," was the reply. "But that man who is engaged to Muriel . . . I never can remember his name . . . has bought it for her as a wedding present."

"Really . . . how . . . how . . . generous of him," she rejoined. Was she speaking of Peter? She could hardly understand what was going on.

They talked more about the Brackenridges' affairs—it was an inevitable topic of conversation, and Nina had become inured to it. She seemed to speak about it all mechanically by now.

But this last piece of gossip, coming as it did after that scene of the morning, almost unnerved her. For the moment it was as

much as she could bear. If it had not all been so deep within her, she could not have sat there talking them all over with mere strangers, his name on her lips. But it was too deep-seated for such outside matters to be impossible to her. It seemed somehow to be something far away—almost like discussing a book that you have read and felt you knew the characters therein, all the while remembering that they were not real.

But Mrs. Willoughby-Lang understood vaguely how this was, and she put aside her tea-cup, saying she was afraid the evenings were drawing in. Nina gratefully took the hint, and they left soon, driving back in the sharp, misty evening, speaking very little on the way.

Her trials were not over yet. At the door they met the Colonel, fussing out to meet them, bursting with the news.

"Heard about Netherwood?" he asked as he helped Mrs. Willoughby out of the trap. "That chap Marchant has bought it for the girl; there'll be no clearance out after all."

"Yes, we heard at tea to-day," answered Nina, giving the reins to the groom; but she stumbled a little on the step.

"That girl is wonderful," thought Mrs. Willoughby, "but she is very nearly at breaking point." She tried unostentatiously to turn the subject by talking of their drive, but the Colonel was full of his bit of news, and kept returning to it.

"Yes, I met the Vicar, and he had just seen Brown, the agent. It's practically settled, and he has bought the whole place, furniture and all. Wonder what he gave for it?" . . .

"I wonder what made him do it?" For the sake of breaking the silence that followed.

"Oh, I suppose that little chit of a girl can twist him round her little finger pretty easily. They say he was to have bought that big place . . . what d'ye call it . . . in Kent, but she preferred this. Brown said he had seen him in town, and he did n't seem overjoyed about it."

"It seems funny of them wanting to come back where they are known, after all this trouble," said Nina gently—she seemed forced to talk about it.

"Oh, that would be Mrs. Jimmy, poor soul," said Mrs. Willoughby-Lang. "I have known her many years, and I know that the one thing that really touches her is her own comfort. . . . I think she would die under the bother of moving away from Netherwood."

"That chap, Marchant—he's a friend of yours, Mrs. Willoughby-Lang, isn't he?" asked the Colonel.

"My godson," said Mrs. Willoughby.

"H'm . . . er . . . yes. . . . What sort of a landlord will he make, do you think?"

Mrs. Willoughby was feeling too acutely for Nina to be coherent.

"Oh, just like any one else . . . I think . . . or no . . . he . . . oh, I don't know . . ."

"Must say I liked what I saw of the chap better than ever I did poor Brackenridge

. . . but I suppose a man is just what his wife will make of him?" The Colonel laughed at his little saying, rubbing his hands.

His wife. . . . It was intolerable. . . .

Nina rose from her chair.

"I have a little job to finish in the garden before dinner, if there is light enough to do it," she said quietly, "so I must go."

She went quickly upstairs for her gardening things, and Mrs. Willoughby did not ask to come into the garden with her, and when the Colonel suggested it, pleaded letters to write.

Even in the garden Nina did not let go her self-control. She had had as much as human nature could stand, but there was no relief for her anywhere. Only to be alone, alone for a few moments in her blessed garden, and try and sort out her confused thoughts—try to realise all that this meant to her.

So to her sanctuary she came, and the chill of the evening lay on it—darkening, dampening, but very peaceful—the peace of the grave, not of happiness.

First, then, he wanted to see her. It would help him, he thought.

She knew differently, but her great longing was overmastering her.

Then he was to own Netherwood, live there, be their landlord. She would, after some time, be bound to meet him, somewhere—in the lanes, at other folks' houses. She would have to call. Even the woods would not be free to her, lest he might be walking therein. At any moment of the day he might, if he chose, pass by the top of the forest path that led from the little green gate.

She shuddered and shuddered at the thought—seeing it all in every detail, accurate, intense—a woman's way. . . .”

Staring down at the brown earth that she loved so well, she knew it would soon have power no longer to shield her, to hold her in sanctuary, to comfort her.

All her life long—and how would he bear it?

Almost frantically she took up her work, planting the rest of those little roots she had

left in the morning. Even in her sorrow she could not bear to leave them lying there all night, uncared-for.

The touch of the soil drew her back into herself. There was magic in it. It was all-healing, wonderful. She worked silently, sanely, almost happily, till the light had fallen, and the close dusk had drawn all about her. Gathering her tools together, she passed down the path at peace.

At dinner she was herself, simple, self-contained, with gay laughter and talk. She had thrust her own great trouble so far down into her heart that she rose above it. It was not like her to make others uncomfortable, by her sadness, for she could not bear sadness to be in the world. Also in her mind, deep down there was simmering an idea, a solution, or at least an attempt at a solution.

After dinner, when the Colonel and Mrs. Willoughby-Lang bent eagerly over their Patience (he was teaching her "Spiders," which of course is very absorbing), she could think clearly, unreservedly. She was knit-

ting tiny woolly socks for poor babies, and this requires much counting of stitches and concentration of mind, therefore her companions understood her silence.

The old clock ticked on, ticked on, with that same maddening precision that she knew so well.

"You see, you work off black nine on red ten, and so on, and all on to the king . . . and that's one spider. . . . Then you deal out, if there is nothing more to do. . . ."

The jargon, which usually drove her inwardly wild, went on unheeded to-night.

"Why should n't you put that run on to the seven?"

Yes . . . yes . . . Yes . . . it was the only way to help him really. He would not know it now, but later in life he would understand. . . . She would do it, must do it—if only she were strong enough. . . . Was she? In her own mind she knew it to be so. . . .

Presently, when spiders had at last come out, and the Colonel was delightedly fussing

over the cards, bristling with joy—"once in six months, Mrs. Willoughby . . . never more, I assure you—" the two women went up to bed.

Nina lit their candles and took the guest to her bedroom door, where she paused to say good-night.

"Mrs. Willoughby," she said gently, "will you tell Peter that certainly I will see him once, if he likes to come."

Mrs. Willoughby looked steadily into her eyes, and then bent and kissed her. "You are a strong woman, my dear," she said.

Nina smiled a little as she went quickly into her own room.

How strong she would have to be, even Mrs. Willoughby could not guess. In her room she went and knelt by the open window, looking out into the damp, misty night.

"Come soon," she said, "come soon," and bowed her head into her hands.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GATE IS SHUT

AT the end of September, when the rain had drenched through the ground again, making the leaves turn early to their autumn glowing after the dry summer, battering to the ground, hammering them in with persistent patter, Peter came once more through the woods to the forest path and the little green gate.

The ground was sodden beneath him, strown with the wrack of the forest, and a soft, soppy rain penetrated through the branches. A damp day, overhead and underfoot; yet there is great joy to be found in these autumn days, and Peter drew breath with keen enjoyment, for he felt in some strange way that he had come back into his own kingdom.

All the later summer he had stayed grilling in London, working hard to set in order, as well as may be, poor Jimmy's affairs, left almost entirely in his hands by the incompetency of James; but he had been glad of the work, thankful for it, and worked harder than he had ever done in the whole of his life. Anything to stave off thought.

Now he had got free at last, free for a day, and he came back to the kingdom that had called and called him, all the hot summer through—the kingdom of open air, of work and health and love. For one day. After that he dared not think, for at the back of his mind he knew that it was madness to come, to turn again to look at the promised land that would never be his. Mad, and perhaps selfish—abominably selfish he thought now, for women are so different from men. Women can live for years on the shadow of a dream—just the mere memory of it—but men demand something more tangible, more explicit. A dream tortures them, where it consoles and feeds a woman.

So he came again to the little green gate, and Nina, hearing the click of it, rose from her knees, where she was working.

It was over two months since that wonderful night of the thunder-storm, but it might have been ages from the change she saw in Peter. He looked much older than his thirty-five years, and so drawn and sad that she felt a sudden hatred of the part she set herself to play. But it had to be done, and she nerved herself for it with an almost super-human effort.

She welcomed him, cool and friendly, as she would have greeted the Vicar of Littleborough, holding out her hand with a little formal smile.

"This is not wise," she said lightly.

"How could I help it? . . . I had n't heard . . . Nina . . . did you understand?" He was holding her hand as though the cool clasp of it was all that he had striven for all his life.

She withdrew it, gently, carelessly.

"Understand . . . but of course . . . what was there not to understand?" She spoke with all her old sweetness, but cool as though

the fire of life had never come near her. Peter thanked the gods for the mere hearing of that voice, the voice that had called, haunted him, maddened him since the summer. Yet somehow he felt a cold chill gripping his heart—she was so cool, so quiet, so self-contained. He knew that it was her nature, just that which he loved in her so; yet when they had met last— His blood went on fire again. Here was the same garden, so well remembered and beloved, the same solitude, so longed for, the same woman—the one and only woman in all the world. . . . And yet——

She was speaking to him, he realised, speaking with the same old gaiety and friendliness of their earlier meetings.

“Now you must come round and see all the things that have come out since you were here . . . such a wonderful lot . . . all the old ones are dead.”

“Except these,” he said quietly as they stood again by the tobacco-plants.

“Oh, yes, there are still some of those strug-

gling on, but their scent is all gone," she said casually, passing them by.

He wondered. Women are strange beings truly. The scent of those flowers had haunted him, night and day.

They strolled round the garden together, Nina pointing out here and there, with the keen air of a gardener, to whom each plant is a child, and he content to be merely at her side again, drinking in the bitter sweetness of the moment. She talked a little more than usual, perhaps, and he found himself silent. All that he had come to say seemed a far-away dream. Nothing was real but the garden and the woman, and the soft misty rain about them—spells—enchantment, woven like spider-webs in the night, unseen.

Then they went up into the forest together, through the little green gate, and up the woodland path, muddy now and strewn with golden leaves, and now she spoke of the Bracken-ridges, and their trouble, very gently and sympathetically, but as of a remote thing, not touching her own world.

"And you are to own Netherwood?" She did not look at him as she spoke.

"Yes, I have bought it." The sadness in his voice hurt her, and she was silent a moment.

"It is a good thing," she said at last.

"You think so?" His tone was bitter.

"Surely. It must be a comfort to them not to turn out."

"To them . . . yes. But what about . . . us?" He made her face him. She did, unflinching.

"What do you mean?" she said, in a gentle, puzzled way.

"Nina," he cried at last, in a low shaking voice, "is it nothing to you . . . nothing? . . . Was it all just a mistake?"

The agony in his face shook her nerves, and she could not answer. Then gathering her strength together, she answered, hesitating:

"You mean . . . about that night of the thunder-storm . . . well, call it . . . a . . . mistake if you like. . . ."

"Nina . . ."

"I think it was just . . . a madness . . . midsummer madness." She laughed a little.

They were standing face to face now under the beeches, Peter calm and deadly white, Nina flushed slightly, biting her lip, her usual tranquillity shaken. But she met his eyes bravely.

"It was . . . nothing . . . to you?"

"I cannot say it was nothing. . . . Such things are always something to a woman. . . . It is only men who can forget so completely, and so easily. . . ."

"My God . . . do you suppose . . . I had forgotten?"

"I did n't know . . . there was n't much to remember."

The part grew almost too much for her.

"Nina . . . do you love me?"

His voice was quick, compelling, direct.

"What right have you to ask me?" she evaded, indignation in her voice.

"The right you gave," he said, looking at her quickly.



**"DESPERATELY SHE TOOK A FEW STEPS TOWARDS THE LITTLE
GREEN GATE."**

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"I can't remember . . . that night . . . the storm was so awful, I think . . . I was terrified."

"Do you mean . . . Nina, for God's sake don't pretend. . . . Did n't you mean anything you said that night? . . . Have I been dreaming about it all?"

"I think . . . you must have. . . ."

"You don't care?"

She pulled herself together for the effort, for the lie.

"No . . . I don't care . . . like that. . . ."

Dead silence fell between them. Then Nina, unable to meet his eyes any more, turned to walk back through the beeches.

The only sound in the forest was the persistent cheerful song of the robins, and the soughing of the light rain through the branches. Their footsteps among the leaves sounded strange.

Nina, womanlike, tried at last to make some trivial remarks, but the words would not come, and silence fell again.

At last the little green gate was reached.

She paused, and turned to him. "I have hurt you . . ." she said gently.

"No . . . no . . . it is I who have been a perfect fool."

"We all have one time in our lives when we mislay our wisdom." She smiled, sympathetically—cruelly so.

"Yes, I know . . . I thought my time had been on another occasion." There came the shadow of his whimsical smile.

"Ah, one never knows till afterwards. Are we friends still?"

"No," he said, lifting his head and looking her in the face; "you know we can't be."

"I am sorry," she said, very gently.

"So there is nothing but good-bye to be said now."

"After all, that is what you came to say."

"And I want to thank you."

"What for?"

"For your one night's madness . . . for the one hour when you were mad enough to dream that you loved me . . . Thank you for that. . . ."

A tremor ran through her frame. Her strength was giving out. One moment more.

"Good-bye, then," she said quickly, and held out her hand.

He scarcely touched it.

"Good-bye."

He held open the little green gate for her, and she passed through into the sanctuary of the garden. The gate clicked to behind her.

So they parted, these two.

It was the little green gate's fault. As I have said it should never have been there. With such a thing in your garden anything might happen, and look what sorrow it brought to these two poor souls, almost more than they could bear. More, certainly, than the woman could bear. When she turned round, he was gone—it was over.

But now there was wild triumph in her heart. She had carried it through, through to the bitter end. She had indeed helped him—helped him for all the years of his life, not merely over the bad hour. He would

stamp her out of his heart now, forget her, and time would heal. There would be no gaping, open wound, bleeding afresh each time they met or even remembered. She would become in time a dream to him, nothing more. He would take up his life's work free of the past, unshackled.

But what of her? Suddenly it came to her that she could not bear it; she was not strong enough. How could she let him go, thinking thus of her—believing her a flirt, a light woman, wholly detestable. . . . She could not, could not, could not. . . . If she called he would hear her still—he could not be far away. . . . She must call him back. . . . She swung round trying to cry his name. . . . Her voice would not come. Again she tried, her hand to her throat, forcing it out. . . . It came in a dry whisper, "Peter. . . ."

She could not. Desperately she took a few steps towards the little green gate, striving to run after him. . . .

Suddenly the world grew dark, and swerved

round her. She flung out her arms towards the wood, and fell in a heap among the flowers.

.

So there was stillness in the upper garden.

The light misty rain dripped on unheeded. Sometimes a leaf from the woods fluttered slowly on to the soppy earth, and the robin sang cheerfully on the fence that shuts the garden from the forest.

Gradually, and very softly, the flowers became aware that the dear woman who tended and loved them was lying there among them, unheeding, unconscious. For a long time they had known that something was wrong, for flowers gauge our emotions almost before we understand them ourselves. When you have wandered in your garden possessed by some special mood, have you not often been conscious of the awareness of the flowers and trees? In some occult way they know and answer to your mood.

Now they understood. They knew all about it — had always known. Of course

they had guessed when the woman's sanctuary had been broken into, when the silence was startled by voices, when another hand than hers, a strong brown hand, had tended them and touched their own brown earth, that it was her mate who had found her out. They, too, had heard the perpetual clicking of the little green gate as he came in and out; and, above all, they remembered the thunder-storm and how frightened they had been, when the woman had been frightened also. And of all the flowers the tobacco-plants knew most, for they had watched the affair from the beginning, and it was they who had been nearest when the woman and man had stood so close together and kissed like their little cousins the birds in spring-time. Also the woman had knelt so often so close to them that they had overheard her thoughts, and they had understood.

Now they wondered what had happened, and why she lay so still there. All that they knew was that she needed comforting.

They came about her softly, brushing her ever so gently with their petals, whispering to her with their perfume. The tall sunflowers bent down to her, and the stately hollyhocks, while the lesser flowers gathered round, anxious and sympathetic.

The little robin hopped off the fence on to the withering sweet-pea hedge, and sang a song.

Still she did not stir, and the flowers grew more anxious. Then he fluttered from the sweet-peas on to the garden barrow, nearer her, and sang again cheerfully. Then, boldly and authoritatively, he flew straight on to her shoulder, as she lay there in a heap. God knows what he said to her in this song, but gradually consciousness dawned, and she opened her eyes.

Dazed, uncomprehending, she came back to life, stirred a little, and sat up.

With a frantic flutter of wings, the robin flew away to his fence. The sound of his flight brought her somehow back to life, but for a moment, just in the waking

stage, she was aware of the flowers about her.

Then suddenly, swiftly, remorselessly, came remembrance, realisation.

Slowly, her head swimming, she gathered her tools together, and went down the pergola path.

The sigh of the flowers came after her as she went. . . .

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Peter, as he shut the green gate behind him, never looked back. He went straight up the forest path and turned into the woods, going whither he neither knew nor cared. He followed no path, but struck straight through the beeches, scattering the wet from the branches, unheeding. All life had swerved from its balance, his kingdom had fallen away from him. There was nothing more he cared for in life or death. He drank the very bottom dregs of misery. It blinded and bewildered him. She had not cared—it was all a hideous mistake. It was for her the emotion of a moment, the passionate hour,

played with and flung aside. He had not thought she was that sort of woman. Ah, she was not, she could not have been. . . .

He plunged on through the woods, the woods that were his now. He hated them, they brought no consolation to him. He loathed the dripping rain and the falling leaves.

Suddenly he felt that he could go no longer. He flung himself down on the sodden earth, his face buried in his hands, but he could not think sanely—his mind was chaos. He lay there a long while, trying to reconstruct his world, but presently he gave up the effort, lying inert, thinking of nothing.

Then it was that gradually he became aware of the earth on which he lay, and the wonderful earth-smell around him. . . . It rose up like incense in a church, full of prayer and mystery. It came about him, enveloping him, so old, so eternal, so calm. . . .

Out of the chaos of his thoughts, suddenly one thing became clear. If she had not cared,

then parting would not have hurt her. There was only his own pain to contend with, to beat down, to master.

He was thankful for that. It was so much easier to bear one's own pain than to think of some one else's.

There was plenty for him to do, thank God. There was Muriel to devote himself to; he could try and make up to the poor child all she had lost in life. He felt somehow more equal to that now, since love was crushed out of his world.

He must take up his life where he had left off in June—back to the old ways, to the old standards. Back to the unrestful whirl of the old life—the sport, the gossip, the gambling.

. . .

He must forget the new life of the garden, the open air. Work . . . Health . . . Love. . . . All that must go into that same shadowy kingdom as the rest of what his friends called his whims. . . .

He rose from the ground wearily, and went on through the woods till he came at last to

the open. There was the road before him, and in the distance the station. . . . He could just catch the four-thirty back to town, he thought, looking at his watch. . . .

THE END

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